

The Bride Wore Black Leather

...and he looked fabulous!



an etiquette guide for the rest of us

by Drew Campbell

illustrated by Donna Barr

The Bride Wore Black Leather...

And He Looked Fabulous!

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Preface

I wrote this book for the same reason that I have written all my other books: because no one else had. There are plenty of etiquette books available, even some that deal specifically with gay and lesbian issues, but no one had yet written a book dealing in detail with the etiquette problems that I and my friends and family face every day of our lives.

Now I had muddled along for three decades and more without facing a duel (or its modern equivalent, the lawsuit), so I assumed I knew enough about etiquette to get by. I write thank you notes, can set a table with more than one fork, and know the correct way to address a letter to the Archbishop of Canterbury. But when it came time for me to get married, I realized I didn't know, as the saying goes, jack.

Worse yet, neither did anyone else. We faced some of the usual problems – people who didn't respond to our invitation on time or who asked to bring unin-vited dates – and some very unusual ones. Like how to introduce my friend Elizabeth's husband and their slave to my wife's boss and her (female) partner. Or how to reassure the Pagans that the Christians wouldn't try to convert them on the spot, and vice versa. Or which of our friend Beth's several partners to invite. Or how to explain to people that my sainted mother probably didn't want to hear the details of their latest piercing. Or how to address an invitation to the rector of my wife's church and his partner of twenty years in a way that acknowledged that they were not just bachelor roommates. Or what to do when someone threatened to boycott the reception because we were availing ourselves of "heterosexual privilege" by getting legally married. So although my wife and I learned more than anyone needs to know about monogrammed table linens and – I still shudder at the memory – "novelty" wedding announcements, we found nothing to help us with the really important issues.

Who Needs Etiquette Anyway?

As our experience with the wedding showed, Lady Etiquette doesn't get out much these days. More's the pity. After all, we weren't the only ones who were confused. Our friends called to ask what they should wear, what gifts to buy, and when and how to deliver them. My mother asked how she should get it across to people fifty years her junior that she prefers not to be called by her first name. My honor attendant needed to know when she should make the first toast and whether I expected a bachelor party. Our friends and families are civilized people. It's just that many of these situations have never been dealt with by traditional etiquette books. In fact, until recently, these folks never would have met each other at all, let alone attended the wedding reception of a Christian leatherdyke and her Pagan female-to-male transsexual Daddy.

When I began the research for this book in January, 1999, I posted an interactive etiquette survey on my web site. I expected to receive fifty, maybe a hundred responses. Six weeks later I had *four hundred* responses, from half a dozen countries. Many of the questions – and some of the answers – you'll find in this book are culled from those surveys. The range of questions the respondents posed was incredibly broad. Some were straightforward (“What are the traditional gifts for a newly engaged couple?”), and some went beyond the reach of etiquette altogether (“Why are all the female-bodied perverts getting sick with fibromyalgia and CFIDS?”). Many walked the fine line between manners and politics – how to counter common misconceptions about alternative sexualities and genders without sounding strident. Some indicated a general trend in society – how to maintain professional boundaries with coworkers and simple privacy with everyone. Others were specific to altsex communities – how to behave at sex parties and leather street fairs. Some asked about groups that aren't strictly altsex (fat folks, Pagans) but which are prominent in altsex communities. The respondents were generous, articulate, funny people, and the stories they shared were often enlightening, and sometimes even inspiring. If nothing else, their collective frustration with what pass for modern manners proved to me once and for all that a concern for etiquette was not just one of my charming eccentricities, but a serious matter indeed.

Despite the challenges of the postmodern age, I believe Lady Etiquette is still up for the job. I've invited her to join us here, in our varied and complex world, because we need her more than ever. Please treat her like a lady – and I guarantee she'll treat you like a queen.

x I should like to thank the following people for their kind wishes, helpful ideas, and timely cups of tea during the writing of this book: Percy Blake, Pat Califia, Anne Campbell, Janet Hardy, Bertha Parkin, Ian Philips, Kirk Read, slave david stein, Jennifer Williams, and Micah Wolfe. This book is dedicated to my godmother, the inimitable Peggy Teufel, whose response to my gender transition scored a perfect 10 with Lady Etiquette: she said simply, "Congratulations."

D.C.

San Francisco

July 27, 1999

Introduction

Poor Etiquette. She who was once invited to more parties, given more perfect gifts, and treated with infinite kindness and respect sits home on a dusty shelf next to *Hints from Heloise* and the yearbook with those mortifying pictures of you with braces and an unspeakable haircut. Her name, when it is mentioned at all, is followed closely by rumors of her death – or calls for it. How could it be otherwise in a culture that lionizes self-expression and “getting your needs met” while neglecting little things like privacy and compassion? Etiquette, once the belle of the ball, is now only a lonely wall-flower, pale and awkward in her outdated finery. Or is she?

What Etiquette Is Not

In the last forty years or so, Lady Etiquette has developed a dreadful reputation, which is ironic considering that she exists only to do things right. I’m not sure who started all the awful rumors about her – although I have my suspicions – but as her humble appointed servant, it is my duty to dispel these wretched untruths. This, then is what etiquette is not. Kindly repeat after me:

- ✂ Etiquette is not a series of arcane and inflexible rules designed to make your life difficult or trip you up in front of your boss.
- ✂ Etiquette is not a tool of the upper classes to belittle everyone else.
- ✂ Etiquette is not a fetish for obscure pieces of cutlery. (That’s just an etiquetteer thing.)
- ✂ Etiquette is not a tool kit for getting ahead in business or for winning friends and influencing people.
- ✂ Etiquette is not what your mother told you to do.
- ✂ Etiquette is not a political statement.



Poor Lady Etiquette! (p. 4)

✧ Etiquette is not a religion, except perhaps for such as your humble servant himself.

What Etiquette Is

Etiquette is a system of useful principles designed to help people get along with others. It is culturally and situationally specific and changes over time. In etiquette, the spirit of the law always takes precedence over the letter. It is the art of putting other people first and making them (not just yourself) comfortable. Understanding etiquette lets us stop worrying about the “hows” of life so we can get on with the “whats.” In short, good manners* are, as Quentin Crisp says, “a way of getting what you want without appearing to be an absolute swine.”

At its most Hobbesian, etiquette assumes that people want their own way, and that left to their own devices, they’ll do horrible things – or at least rude things – to get it. The truth of this proposition is obvious to anyone who’s ever set foot on an elementary school playground (or San Francisco public transit). In fact, much of our educational system is focused on learning how *not* to follow our natural instincts – like the ones that tell us to clobber anything that gets in our way. Etiquette does not ignore individual difference; rather, it allows us to deal with difference without taking blunt instruments to each others’ heads.

Etiquette is essentially democratic. Its effectiveness is rooted in the mutual agreement among members of a society about what constitutes appropriate and inappropriate behavior. Etiquette is free; anyone, regardless of gender, ethnicity, orientation, or relative wealth, can be polite. It cannot be denied to the individual who wants it. Furthermore, rules of etiquette that are no longer fulfilling their peace-keeping role are summarily discarded by society. Since few men wear hats now, young boys are no longer taught when they should remove theirs. We no longer assume that able-bodied women are too helpless to open a door for themselves or to stand on a crowded bus. Few women today would be offended if a man didn’t rise when she entered the room, and a sizable number might be offended if he did.

Although etiquette is available to everyone, the process by which a rule becomes a rule is a little more complex. So please bear with me as we take a brief detour into the world of class.

* I use the term “etiquette” to refer to the underlying system of socially accepted behaviors and “manners” to refer to the behaviors themselves.

Darling, It's Definitely U!: Class and Traditional Etiquette

If there's one subject that makes more Americans uncomfortable than just about anything else – including sex – it's class. Ironically, not even sociologists, who make a living worrying about this sort of thing, have managed to come up with definitions that everyone agrees on. The general idea, though, is clear: class identity is based on a complex mixture of attitudes and values that stem, in part, from one's family's socio-economic status. While people can and do change their jobs, income, and education levels, class-based assumptions and preferences – colloquially known as “taste” – are virtually set for life.*

Traditional etiquette guides walk a fine line: they are meant to convey upper-class rules of behavior to middle-class people. (It's assumed that upper-class people imbibe their manners *cum lacte* and so do not need books to help them along.) In our highly mobile culture, it is quite possible for a person to be raised in a single-parent home with little money, become a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford, then a governor, and finally end up president of the United States. (It's also possible to offend a whole lot of people along the way.) A person whose life circumstances have changed this radically is going to need, at various times, to adapt to new social expectations. That's where the study of etiquette and protocol comes in – and why Washington, D.C., is awash with etiquette consultants.

Unfortunately for those of us not to the “manor” born, upper-class norms don't translate well to middle-class circumstances. For example, when visiting another person's house, middle-class children are taught to murmur some polite phrase about the house itself or to take note of some facet of the decor: “You have such a lovely home, Mrs. Snorglebaugh! And what a beautiful collection of antique chamber pots! I'm sure I've never seen anything more unique.” Upper-class children, on the other hand, learn never to comment on their surroundings, as it's assumed that everything will be beautiful and expensive. Likewise, at the dinner table, middle-class people, after the first bite of food, will often make some approving noise or gesture as a compliment to the chef, who is, of course, the woman of the house. Upper-class women don't cook – their servants do – and it is again expected that the food will be superb. Therefore, the appropriate response is simple silence. Consequently, when leaving, one thanks the upper-class hostess for “the lovely evening,” not “the lovely meal.”

* For more on the ins and outs of class in America, see *Class* by English professor and veteran curmudgeon Paul Fussell. For the British version – and details of the (in)famous “U and non-U” controversy – see *Noblesse Oblige*, edited by Nancy Mitford, and also *People Like Us* by Charles Jennings.

What's more, middle-class people trained by traditional etiquette books (or well-meaning parents) are often shocked when they first encounter a real, live born-rich person. Upper-class people don't ask to be directed to the lavatory; they ask for the toilet. (Even the Queen says "loo.") Among friends, they may even announce that they have to piss. Similarly, middle-class children are taught to say "excuse me" when they belch or "pass wind" (a distinctly middle-class euphemism in itself). The upper class ignores it altogether – knowing that it's rude to draw attention to a *faux pas*, even one's own – while the lower class will make a joke out of it: "Don't go lighting any matches around me today!"

Modern manners in the United States are even more complex. In this country, it's common among the middle and working classes to introduce people by giving their name (often only the first name) and profession. Traditional etiquette guides frown on this usage. Why? Because, as any European will tell you, asking what someone does is the equivalent of asking how much money that person earns. (And, of course, upper-class people don't necessarily work at all – and neither do the very poor.) Imagine attending a party at which you were introduced to the other guests as "Susan, who makes \$90K" or "Larry, who gets food stamps." And yet in the US, one of the first questions a new acquaintance will inevitably ask is "What do you do?" The same difficulty arises when discussing where a person lives: in some cities, this is a not-too-subtle way of asking about that person's income, ethnicity, and even religion. Traditional etiquette guides are not amused. The rest of us are just bewildered.

My mother tells a funny story that shows how class and background affect even our most superficial exchanges – and our understanding of etiquette. When she was a young newlywed in the 1940s, she worked for a large government agency that employed people from a range of circumstances and backgrounds. One morning, my mother arrived at work carrying a new handbag. When a coworker complimented her on it, my mother, in her typically modest and self-effacing style, said, "Oh, thank you. I got it on sale at Bloomingdale's." Later another coworker, an older woman, took her aside and told her never to admit she'd bought something on sale. "Let them think you paid full price!" was her advice.

What made this exchange all the more ironic was that my mother found this particular woman's own behavior baffling, even laughable. Once a year, after scrimping and saving, this woman rented a fur coat for her trip to Florida (!), in hopes that a mink would impress some eligible bachelor enough to induce him to propose on the spot! My mother still chuckles over the whole thing.

Now from the point of view of etiquette, this story shows very clearly the backgrounds of the women involved. My mother comes from a small, rural town

in western Pennsylvania; her father was a farmer. She was raised to believe that she should never “put on airs” or make herself appear better than anyone else. So, when complimented, she tends to deflect the praise to put herself back on social par with her complimenter. My mother’s coworker’s family were recent immigrants to the United States; they were striving to get ahead and make a name for themselves. They were embarrassed by their poverty. For a woman of that generation, “marrying money” was one of the fastest and easiest ways to find acceptance in her new culture. Sadly for her, no amount of rented mink could save her from her working-class accent and attitudes.

Interestingly, most etiquette books would find every person in this story at fault in some way. The person who paid the compliment should not have mentioned the bag specifically – a simple “You look lovely today” would have been sufficient. (And in today’s work environment, any mention of a coworker’s appearance would be questionable.) My mother should have responded with a simple smile and a thank you. The coworker should have minded her own business; correcting someone’s etiquette in the way she did is in itself a breach of etiquette. And yet each person undoubtedly thought that she was being polite and helpful.

Until relatively recently, few people worked or socialized outside their own class; most people never had an occasion to notice these differences in etiquette. Only when one moved into a new milieu – through job promotion, marriage, or some other radical change in circumstances – did one become aware of them. Sometimes painfully so: “My Fair Lady” showed us that you can teach a working-class girl to speak the King’s English, but you can’t take her to the races. Young lovers are often perplexed by their parents’ worries over their match – “Who cares what her father does? I’m not marrying him!” – but more often than not, these concerns center on class. We may not use the word, substituting euphemisms like “background” or “similar values,” but class is at the heart of what holds our social worlds together.

Alternative Communities. Class. and Etiquette

As we’ve seen, social mobility can generate etiquette confusion. But more important for our inquiry is the rise of alternative communities based on specific facets of experience, like sexual orientation. What is unusual about alternative communities, and especially “altsex” communities – those based on a common experience of sexuality or gender – is that they cut across the usual social categories of class based on ethnicity, education, profession, and so on. Affinity with an alternative community’s shared experience of oppression can – at least sometimes

– override the class differences between individual members. In fact, as we'll see, alternative communities generate their own codes of conduct, often in response, or opposition, to the oppressive majority.

The most obvious example of this tendency is linguistic. Altsex communities have reclaimed a number of loaded words and transformed them from terms of abuse to badges of pride. Epithets like queer, fag, dyke, tranny, slut, and pervert are, within specific altsex communities, humorous terms of endearment. Yet woe to the outsider who uses them to shame or insult an altsexer.

Once a community's political efforts pay off and the worst of the oppression has passed, however, the members of alternative communities can relax. The need for group identification though rigid codes of conduct slackens. What takes their place is often the original class assumptions of the individual members. (In fact, those assumptions may well have been present in some form all along.) You'll see some of the not-so-pretty results in the chapters that follow, but for now, here's one example.

A friend of mine still talks about a Thanksgiving dinner that she and several other lesbian buddies organized a few years ago. My friend was planning a traditional spread – turkey, stuffing, pumpkin pie, the works. On the menu were mashed potatoes. One of the guests offered to bring them... in the form of "instant" potatoes from a box. My friend was appalled – potatoes from a box? – and declined with the polite fiction that she "already had the potatoes covered, thanks." Guest insisted: It just wouldn't be Thanksgiving without instant potatoes. Friend was stymied. To her credit, she recognized that the issue wasn't just the nature of spuds, but the nature of class. She and her guests might all be hip, urban dykes, but that didn't mean that all things were equal. (For my advice to her on handling this mish-mash, see page 43.)

Here is one important reason for us altsexers to take a careful look at etiquette. Unlike more established communities, we are building our standards from the foundations up, sometimes on very bumpy ground. Our diversity – perhaps our greatest strength – is also our greatest challenge. (In this, we are a microcosm of the United States as a whole, which faces an enormous social crisis as our ethnic and socio-economic mix changes.) In order to take advantage of that strength, we need to pull together – and that means that we have to treat each other well.

But treating our friends and allies nicely is only half the story. Alternative communities live in creative tension with the dominant culture. Most of us live and work primarily with people outside our altsex worlds. Our parents may not share our affinities; neither do many of our children. Through political action and one-on-one education, altsex communities have engineered an enormous revolu-

tion in public opinion. Still, we must make our way through treacherous terrain more often than not. Arlo Guthrie said that “if you want to end war and stuff, you gotta sing LOUD.” Lady Etiquette answers that, while you may need to sing loud in the halls of the Capitol – and how delightfully they echo! – at home, it’s only polite to keep things down to a dull roar. Etiquette tells us how to do so without sacrificing our values or alienating the people we most want to convince of our position.

This book, then, suggests some general guidelines for altsex etiquette, based not on random rulings from on high, but on some basic, common-sense principles. To some, these ideas may seem awfully traditional, and in fact, they are. Truth be told, there’s very little in traditional etiquette to offend our modern altsex sensibilities, and much that we can adopt and adapt. What you’ll find here are the logical extensions of some time-tested rules for treating people well. And who doesn’t want to be treated well?

How to Use This Book

Unlike traditional etiquette guides, this book isn’t divided primarily by situation, but by principle. The reason for this is simple: no one person can predict all the horrific etiquette experiences of a lifetime – and trust me, there are more than you can imagine. But if you understand the basic principles of etiquette, you can do the math yourself and figure out the best way to handle things. For those who just need a quick answer to a specific question, we’ve provided an extensive index. For questions about fish knives and meeting the Pope, there’s also a bibliography that includes books by some of your humble servant’s more illustrious mainstream colleagues.

RULE 1: CONTEXT IS EVERYTHING.

Etiquette, as a system, is based on what are sometimes called “community standards.” Community standards reflect group values by positing a “Joe Average” citizen and determining how that mythical person would respond to a given situation. They assume that a shared background and set of common experiences will result in shared beliefs and values. As lawmakers know, values are a grassroots phenomenon, not a universal one: what is scandalously pornographic in Alabama may appear openly on a newsstand in California. Community standards, then, are essentially democratic. The majority rules.

But what happens if you’re not a member of the majority? There are several possible responses. First, you can work to change your community’s standards through education and agitation. Second, you can become an outlaw, consciously living outside your community’s norms and facing the social consequences. Third, you can move to another community, becoming an “intellectual expatriate.” Finally, you can become a cultural polyglot – fluent in the manners of the majority as well as whatever other communities you feel a part of. In practice, people often mix and match these techniques: suit-and-tie on the job; leather at the bar; political activism in the streets.

Just as immigrant communities struggle to maintain their distinctive culture while succeeding in the mainstream’s melting pot, altsexers negotiate difference and similarity at every turn. Since altsex folks live in a predominantly non-altsex world, we’re usually “etiquette bilingual”: adept in more than one set of manners. Just as you wouldn’t use the same table manners at a family barbeque as you would at a state dinner, different standards apply depending on your surroundings. You wouldn’t expect people at a cocktail party to raise their hands before speaking; likewise, you wouldn’t learn much in a classroom where the students blurted out whatever crossed their minds, regardless of its relevance to the topic at hand. (Hence the danger of taking the Internet as a model for higher learning.)

When in doubt about how to act, ask yourself what the common denominator is. What assumptions do all the people in a given context share?

A Basic Question

Q Are social norms and standards different within the community and outside of it?

A If by “norms” you mean what routinely happens, then, yes, there are some distinct differences between altsex behavior and that of non-altsexers. In fact, that’s the cause of many of the misunderstandings you’ll read about in this book.

Standards are a more complex matter. If “norms” tell us what really happens, “standards” tell us what ought to, and here there are fewer differences than one might think. Most “altsex” etiquette situations turn out to be, on closer inspection, plain old human etiquette questions. Those that aren’t, come down to run-of-the-mill prejudice, which goes beyond both etiquette and altsex communities – but that doesn’t mean we can ignore it. Further, there isn’t always agreement among altsexers about standards: individual communities and the people in them may hold mutually exclusive views on any given topic. The key to successful social navigation is the ability to assess the context correctly and adjust your behavior accordingly.

Mixed Messages

Q What are the rules for mixed social gatherings – gay/straight, leather/non-leather, and so on?

A It depends on the setting and the mix of people. A mainstream setting – which includes virtually all public places that are not specifically altsex-

Remember that there is a local propriety to be observed in all companies; and that what is extremely proper in one company, may be, and often is, highly improper in another. – Lord Chesterfield

friendly – dictates mainstream manners. When in doubt, take your cue from your host/ess, but if there is none, assume that the mainstream rules apply and that the protocol for specific altsex communities does not. For example, in a mixed setting, it is unreasonable to expect non-leather people to call you “Grand Leathermaster Bob” or to listen calmly as you expound on your newest punishment for wayward submissives.

What you *can* expect is civility and mutual respect for privacy. If you happen to be the token altsexer, you are under no obligation to speak for your community, to defend controversial community decisions, or even to iden-



What are the rules for mixed social settings? (p. 13)

tify yourself as altsex. Likewise, don't expect the non-altsexers to express a burning interest in topics that, frankly, don't affect them. Keep conversation to mutually agreeable – and intelligible – subjects and steer clear of “hot button” issues.

Unclear on the Concept

Q What are the rules of mixed gyms? When you are standing in a public shower, is it okay to just ask, “So, how big does it get?”

A The rules of mixed gyms – by which I assume you mean gyms used by both gay and non-gay men – are the same as those in any mixed setting: mainstream manners take precedence. But I sense that what you're asking isn't “what are the rules” but “how can I break them and get away with it.”

Etiquette frowns on any question that assumes, as yours does, that one person's curiosity – or libido – is more important than another person's privacy. Your come-on line, which might pass for playful banter in an all-gay context, may well get more of a rise out of a non-gay man than you bargained for. Heterosexual men do not, as you've no doubt noticed, usually enjoy come-ons from gay men. While an enlightened few may graciously accept the implied compliment, backhanded as it is, far more will become defensive and sometimes outright violent. No, those aren't appropriate (or polite) responses, but when you're naked in a locker room, do you really want to find out if the 200-pound bruiser you've just propositioned is a sensitive New Age guy or a Neanderthal throw-back?

*Comment: Are you a fag? Response:
Why do you ask? Are you single?
– Mark Allen*

More troubling than the obvious safety issues, though, is the implication that all you're interested in is the guy's dick. There is simply no way to make this kind of statement politely. Etiquette – and polite people of all stripes – assume that any kind of intimate contact takes place between two consenting adults, not a random assortment of body parts. If the size of the penis matters more to you than the man attached to it, I suggest you visit your local adult toy store, where you can find a wide selection of dildos – which won't find your question as offensive as the rest of us do.

You've Got Male

Q I'm a member of a major online service. The other morning I was reading email when an "instant page" flashed on my screen. Apparently this person had read my profile and had assumed from my screen name and location that I was gay. He was asking for my "stats" and wanted to meet in a nearby park. Now in reality, I'm married and monogamous, and I found his online cruising methods tactless (not to mention dangerous – either of us could have been an ax-murderer). Short of deleting my profile, which contains information about my business, how can I avoid these crude come-ons?

Comment: Can't you make a choice? Response: Yes, I can. I choose not to fuck you. – Schmarr

A You're under no obligation to respond to messages from strangers. In fact, most online services have strict rules about unsolicited contact, so if you receive a vulgar or threatening message, do not respond to the sender, but forward the message to customer service. If the message is just tacky, you can respond with a simple, "No thanks." Many email, chat, and pager programs have "ignore" features; if necessary, avail yourself of them.

Business and Pleasure: Don't Ask, Don't Tell

Q I am a gay leatherman who works for a straight-owned company. I never know what to say when people ask me what I did with my weekend. Should I tell them I went to the beer bust at the Eagle, or a jack-off club?

A The rule of thumb for business settings is that you should share information that would cause serious misunderstandings if it were omitted, but maintain your privacy about everything else. In practice, this means that you can and usually should make clear your sexual orientation to people who are likely to see you in social settings. Since most companies integrate at least some form of socializing into their work routine (office parties, company picnics, holiday bashes) and expect spouses or dates to attend, it is appropriate to let your coworkers know that you're gay, lesbian, or bisexual. If you're polyamorous and have multiple partners who may be calling you at work, it's also helpful to say, "I'm always available to take calls from John and Susan." So, orientation and relationship status, *da*.

But specifics, *nyet*. Just as you wouldn't want to hear the details of your coworkers' menstrual or impotence problems, you don't need to share all about your sex life. It's fine to say that you "went out to a bar with friends," but not so fine to talk about what you did at the sex club you all visited afterwards. Leave them guessing. It's the professional choice, and it makes you seem all the more fascinating to boot.

What if they won't take no for an answer? The easiest way to deflect

From a supervisor: I don't care what his sex life is, he does good work.
– Silver Unicorn

intrusive questions – and you will undoubtedly encounter both the naive and the prurient versions of these at one time or another – is to say, "Oh, it was nothing special. What did you do?" Truth be told, people would much rather talk about themselves anyway.

Formality Is Not a Dirty Word

Etiquette writers disagree on the exact date, but at some point in the last hundred years or so, Americans fell prey to the misconception that formality –

The true gentleman is friendly but not familiar; the inferior man is familiar but not friendly. – Confucius

that is, a certain social distance with strangers – was undemocratic. In place of the old social forms that still obtain elsewhere, Americans began to substitute what they call "friendliness" – which everyone else sees as shallow and invasive familiarity. Your humble servant would like to suggest that nothing is more egalitarian than the honorifics "Mr." and "Ms.," applying as they do to everyone, regardless of social class, ethnicity, or other status-marker. Likewise, the handshake, offered to street sweeper and Congressperson alike, remains the quintessential mark of the mannerly. Democracy does not mean treating everyone equally shabbily.

How Do You Do?: On Introductions

Guidelines for introductions are one of the mainstays of traditional etiquette. Apparently, this common act is fraught with much anxiety. As a result, etiquette manuals list the multiple equations that figure into this complex social algorithm: one introduces younger people to older, men to women, and social inferiors to their superiors. Clearly, this system places a burden on the person doing the intro-

ducing: how would you introduce a young female minister and a older male diplomat, for example? Add to this the now-common practice of introducing people by first name only (sometimes with their occupation appended) and we find ourselves living in a world populated by people called “Jane-the-electrician” and “Mike-the-accountant” – none of whom have ever been properly introduced.

In altsex settings, as elsewhere, there is also a great deal of concern to convey the nature of relationships between people. A huge percentage of the respondents to my etiquette survey were unsure about how to introduce their partners, or those of others, to friends, family, or employers. The answer to this question is simple: Use their names. Both of them.

Two Sirs, With Love

Q When introducing a Master to another Master, do you say, “Master Skip, this is Master Dave,” or just cut the pretense and say, “Skip, this is Dave”?

A Introduce the person you know better (say, Skip) to the one you know less well. The ideal introduction looks like this:

You: Dave, I’d like to introduce Skip Studly. Skip, this is Dave Dashing. *Dave* (offers hand): I’m pleased to meet you, Mr. Studly. *Skip* (shakes hand): Please, call me Skip.

Notice that you have made no mention whatsoever of their leather titles, because with the exception of physicians and military personnel, titles are not used in social settings. In the US, “mister” – which, it should be noted, is derived from the word “master” – is used for every male over the age of eight from the street sweeper to the president. Also, Dave does not assume that he is on a first-name basis with Skip just because you are.

If you are a submissive in service to Skip, the introduction is taking place in an exclusively leather setting, and you have been given no prior instructions, you might say:

You: Dave, I’d like to introduce Skip Studly. Master, this is Dave Dashing. *Dave* (offers hand): My pleasure, Mr. Studly. *Skip* (shakes hand): Please, call me Skip.

In practice, almost everyone these days will immediately jump to first names – more’s the pity. If the person you are introducing does not wish to be addressed that way, it is up to him or her to gently correct the other person: “Actually, I prefer Mr. Dashing.”

Better and Best

Q How do I introduce a girlfriend and a servant in such a way that it's made clear that the servant is the more honored position?

A One way is to introduce others to your servant and your girlfriend to others, which indicates that you consider the servant an honored personage. If this would be awkward, or cause hard feelings between the two, you can also use body language to indicate your esteem for your servant. A hand placed warmly on the servant's back or shoulder as the introduction is made, coupled with an appreciative glance, will set the right tone.

That's *Miss* Slave to You

Q I often attend social gatherings with my slave, cindy (who also happens to be my girlfriend). What is the appropriate way to introduce her?

A In a mixed or mainstream setting, she should be introduced by her full name. Her status as your slave is irrelevant outside the leather community. At a leather event, you may introduce her as follows:

You: cindy, come here. I want you to meet someone. (she approaches) slave, this is John Brown. John, this is slave cindy. *John* (nods to cindy): My pleasure, cindy. *cindy:* (bows or curtsies and, if permitted to speak, says): The pleasure is mine, Mr. Brown! (If you do not permit her to use possessives, she can simply say, "Sir!" or "Mr. Brown!" while bowing.)

The Right Reverend

Q What is the proper way to introduce Pagan/Wiccan priest/esses?

A As there is no one title for Pagan clergy – and some function without legal recognition and cannot therefore be called "the Reverend" – it is always proper to introduce them with their social title and last name. However, if the person's tradition uses a definite title – Reverend Gothi/Gythia for example – you should use that title in your introduction unless the clergy person prefers otherwise.

You: Mom, I'd like to introduce you to the Reverend Gythia Adelgard Althof. *Ms. Althof,* this is my mother, Mary Jones. *Rev.:* I'm so pleased to

meet you, Ms. Jones. Please just call me Adelgard. *Mom:* It's a pleasure, Adelgard.

Heart-Stopping Love

Q How do I introduce my partner to elderly relatives without having them keel over and die of shock?

A Older folks are often more understanding than their children (your parents) think. A simple "Grandma, this is Louise Lovely" accompanied by a loving look and gentle squeeze of Louise's arm is all that's needed.

Um-Friends

Q My partner and I will be attending a family reunion. I'm out to most of my family as a lesbian, but this is the first time that many of them will be meeting a lover of mine. How should I introduce her?

A Avoid the dreaded "um-friend," as in "This is my, um, friend." Just use her (full) name. Because of the family-only context and your being out, there's no need to identify your partner in any other way. For example, put your arm lovingly around your partner's shoulder and say, "Aunt Clare, this is Grace Murphy. Grace, this is my aunt, Mrs. Rodriguez." Then beam proudly at both your partner and your aunt.

Boss One. Meet Boss Two

Q My boyfriend and I will be attending a company party together. What is the correct way to introduce my lover to my boss?

A It's cruel to inflict office parties on people who haven't already made a commitment to your dirty socks and student loan payments, so people don't bring "dates" to office parties (or, for similar reasons, to weddings or family reunions). Since no one brings anything *but* "spouse equivalents" to office parties, there's no need to introduce your partner as such – it's obvious that only someone who loves you more than life itself would attend a business social event (now there's an oxymoron) with you. Ergo, present your partner by name only: "Mr. Terwilliger, may I present John Smartfellow. John, this is Marmaduke Terwilliger."

This Is Joe's Whatever

Q I'm not a part of the leather community myself, but many of my friends are. How do I introduce someone's slave, grll, or boi to a third party?

A It depends on the setting. In a mixed or mainstream setting, use the person's full name only, as the details of their relationships are a private matter. In a leather setting, it is really the prerogative of tops to introduce their bottoms. If the top isn't available, once again you would just use the person's name, and let them clarify their relationship themselves.

You: Lisa, I'd like you to meet George Strongarm. George, this is Lisa Amazon. *George:* Hello, Lisa. *Lisa:* I think we may have met at the Leather Ball last year. Do you know my Daddy, Annette?

Grace Under Pressure

Q Is it appropriate to look into a dominant's eyes when being introduced? What do you do with your hands?

A Of course you may look into a dominant's eyes; your hand should be offered to shake. Unless you have established a relationship with that dominant, s/he will not expect you to follow any particular D/s protocol. If you are introduced in a mainstream setting and wish to convey your awareness of a domly presence, bow slightly as you shake hands. This subtle gesture will not be lost on an attentive dominant.

Take Three

Q How do I introduce multiple partners at a social gathering?

A If you are sure that most of the people at the gathering will "get" your relationship without a lot of prying questions, you may certainly introduce your partners by name and the terms that all of you agree upon: "This is my wife, Brenda (and her last name, if it's different from yours), and our girlfriend, Marie Ladue." If getting this specific would cause confusion or discomfort for the majority of those present, or for your beloveds, it's best to stick to names: "This is Brenda, and this is Marie." In either case, a matter-of-fact tone is vital. The key here is to avoid your relationship becoming the talk of



How do I introduce multiple partners at a social gathering? (p. 21)

the party. This is not because it's shameful, but because etiquette frowns on any one person or group taking up more than their fair share of social space.

Plus One Makes

Q How do I introduce my partner's other partner?

A By name only. Unless you are also involved with the person in question, you shouldn't try to explain their relationship.

And No Air Kisses, Either

Q What is the proper way to acknowledge another gay person of the same gender when you've just been introduced? Is a gentle hug too personal? Or is anything less than "groping them hello" too formal?

A Unless you're talking about the dance floor at a circuit party, hugging a person you've just met is an invasion of personal space. Take your cue from the person who introduced you – who presumably knows you both – and the other person. Was the introduction formal ("I should like to present Mr. Abercrombie-Wu") or are you in a business setting? If so, only a handshake will do. If the introduction was more casual ("Hey, Jennie, this is my friend Leena"), then you can offer your hand, or just smile and say hello.

It's not uncommon, particularly on the West Coast, for people who've met at a party and found some point of common interest to hug when they part. If you prefer not to hug for whatever reason, rest assured that a handshake is always correct. Good middle ground can be created by gently resting your hand on the side of other person's upper arm for a moment, especially if you're taking your leave while they're involved in a conversation. (No "playful" butch punches, though.)

This Is... Um...

Q A friend of mine is a stripper, and for work she uses a stage name. When I introduce her to people, should I use her stage name or her real name?

A Unless you are in a sex-work-specific setting, use her real name. Sex workers use professional names and stage personas as a way to draw a line between their work and private lives. Unfortunately not all clients respect confiden-

tiality, so using a stage name makes it possible for the sex worker to recognize and ignore inappropriate solicitations in public.

Getting Friendly

Q I have recently come to the United States from Germany, and I am confused by what Americans mean when they say “my friend.” In Europe, when I call someone a friend, I mean that we have a very close and trusting relationship, and “my friend” means “my lover.” Last night I was at a bar and had just met a guy. A few minutes later, he introduced me to another person as “his friend” – and then he couldn’t even remember my name! What does friendship mean to Americans?

A Linguistically, very little. Americans tend to use the word “friend” very loosely for a wide range of relationships. Since I share your discomfort with the overuse of a word that was once a coveted term of honor, I offer the following reminders of the riches of the English language:

- ⌘ Those with whom one shares a hobby are properly referred to as “fellow enthusiasts.”
- ⌘ Those who espouse a common political cause are “comrades,” “allies,” or “fellow-travelers.”
- ⌘ That charming person you’ve just met is “this charming person I’ve just met, [name].”
- ⌘ Relatives are “my [fill in relation] [name]” The name given should be the one your relative wants to be called by the person you’re introducing them to: “My aunt, Mrs. Terwilliger, and my cousin Edith.”
- ⌘ The people you work with are your “coworkers” or “colleagues.”
- ⌘ Virtually everyone else is a “stranger” or an “acquaintance.”

Going Postal: Written Forms of Address

Although I fear that the handwritten note is going the way of the T. Rex, familiarity with the niceties of written forms of address still sets the polite apart from the crowd.

His and His

Q My son Chuck lives with his lover. I often send gifts to both of them for holidays and such, but I am unsure about how to address packages, envelopes, etc. I don't want to slight my son's partner, but I've never even met him and I feel silly writing, "Dear Chuck and Larry."

A The traditional form of written address for two unmarried people who live at the same address is to write each name on a separate line:

Mr. Charles Unterhosen
Mr. Lawrence Snorglebaugh
123 Lovers Lane
Boystown, CA 94114

Married couples are treated to an "and": Mr. and Mrs. Seymour Glass. If your son and his partner have had a formal commitment ceremony, it is only right to bestow the conjugal "and" on them and address the envelope to "Mr. Charles Unterhosen and Mr. Lawrence Snorglebaugh" all on one line. (Don't write "Messrs", though: it's only used for brothers.) If one or the other has a title other than "Mr.," he gets precedence on the envelope: "Rev. Dr. Lawrence Snorglebaugh and Mr. Charles Unterhosen." If the names are too long to fit on one line, they may be divided up this way:

Mr. Charles Unterhosen-Dinkelbrot
and
Mr. Lawrence Snorglebaugh-Jones

In the body of the letter, you can write "Dear Chuck," and end with "I do hope you and Larry enjoy the rhinestone-encrusted garden trowels" or simply "Do give Larry my best!"

Crafty Forms of Address

Q My partner and I will be handfasted soon and would like to invite the High Priestess of another coven and her spouse. How should I address the invitation? Is it appropriate to use her Craft name?

A Some Wiccans use their Craft names openly; others do not. If you're not sure about the priestess's preference, ask. One solution is to address the outer envelope using the standard social forms and the inner envelope with

their Craft names. If the priestess uses the title “Reverend” in her professional life, be sure to address the envelope accordingly.

Outer:

Mr. and Mrs. Ronald Unassuming

Ms. Lynette Subtle

Inner:

Lady Morgan Oakwillow, Lord Argus, and Poppy (polyamorous Pagan family)

The same technique can be used for other altsexers who use “scene” names:

Outer:

Ms. Jane N. Control

Mr. John Goodboy

Inner:

Mistress Jane and johnny-boy (dominant/submissive couple)

Note that by inviting people using their “scene” names, you are implying that you want their “scene” personas at your party, or at very least that they should feel free to speak openly about their relationship. If this is not what you had in mind, stick to the standard social forms.

It's the Story of a Lovely Lady...

Q One of my dear friends has an open marriage and lives with his wife, their paramour, and her boyfriend. All four have different last names. How do I address letters to the whole bunch of them?

A If you are closest to one person in the household, you can address the letter to him, perhaps adding “& Family,” and include a note asking that he share it with his partners, mentioning them all by name. If the envelope is large enough, and all four have made a commitment to each other, you can also try this:

Mr. John Jones and Ms. Mary Smith

and

Mr. Alan Johnson and Ms. Lisa Brown

Mr./Ms. Guest?

Q I recently received an invitation to a relative's wedding, which came addressed to "Ms. Smith and Guest." I am single and dating, but there's no one special I'd want to inflict my family on. Must I bring a guest?

A No, but you're entitled to a moment of distress on Lady Etiquette's behalf. Your would-be hosts have committed an all-too-common gaffe: the form "& Guest," while wishing to be generous, does nothing but signal to those invited that the hosts were too lazy to find out whom, if anyone, their friends and family are dating. Can you imagine an invitation addressed to "Mr. Eric Umpteenth & Wife" or "Ms. Veruca Salt & Husband"? The form "& Guest" is equally rude.

But you didn't ask that, did you? Simply write a note – or fill out the reply card, if provided – accepting the invitation yourself and leaving out all mention of Mr. or Ms. Guest.

Mayhem in Mecca

Is it something in the water? Life in the gay ghetto offers many welcome diversions, to be sure, but it also seems to encourage a kind of regional cluelessness.

Trendy Sidewalk Blockage

Q I just moved from New York to a major urban gay neighborhood on the West Coast. The city is beautiful, but what's with the boys who can't walk down the street at a reasonable pace? These are able-bodied guys, but they wander down the street at a crawl, weave all over the place, stop in the middle of the sidewalk to chat, admire themselves in the shop windows, or just to stare into space. When I tell them to "move it," they get very snippy.

A Howdy, Neighbor! I'm a transplant New Yorker, too, and other than the most stentorian "Excuse me!" I can muster, I still haven't figured out how to deal with this oddity of Castro life. Confidential to our neighbors: It's called a *sidewalk* for a reason. You look just as hot posing on the side of the walking area – and much less inconsiderate.



What's with the boys who can't walk down the street at a reasonable pace? (p. 27)

Voicemail or the Void?

Q Why do none of my gay friends in San Francisco ever return phone calls? These people have cell phones, voicemail, email, and beepers, but I can't ever manage to actually speak to any of them.

A The entire city needs to be forced to recite affirmations for "people who communicate so much that they never manage to actually talk to anyone but themselves." My question to you is this: Why do you persist in calling these people your friends? They sound like distant acquaintances to me, and self-absorbed ones at that.

You Can Check Out Any Time You Like. But Your Guests Will Never Leave

Q I live in San Francisco, and twice a year like clockwork, during the first weeks of June and September, the calls start. People I haven't heard from since the same time last year want to know if they can "just crash on my floor" during the Pride and Folsom festivities. I live in a two-room apartment and frankly, I don't want to have to step over a comatose body to get to the toilet. What's worse, people who say it will only be for one night are here for three, four, five nights. Those that have the courtesy to stay in a hotel are around for weeks and expect me to drop everything and spend every night out at the bars. I have a job, a boyfriend – in short, a life. How can I get these freeloaders out of my apartment?

A By not letting them in it in the first place. Before the next round of calls starts, practice reciting the following sentence, "I really just don't have the room." These opening variations may help: "Honestly, I wish I could, but..." "I'm awfully sorry, it's just that..." "Oh, I'd love to see you, but...." Repeat as necessary.

And Now for Something Completely Different: Changing the Topic Gracefully

Q When I was growing up way back when, I was taught that there are certain things that one just didn't discuss in public. I still think some of the old ways weren't such a bad idea – at least I didn't have to listen to people rattle on

about their strange dietary practices at dinner. What's an old-fashioned fellow to do?

A Keep a mental list of at least three totally neutral topics that you can discuss at any time. These can be the old standbys – the weather, sports, movies – or subjects of local interest, like civic renovations, traffic, or upcoming events. Review and refresh your topics occasionally. These are equally useful for stopping inappropriate, mildly offensive, or just plain boring monologues. They are applied as follows:

Bore: “Drone, drone, drone... .” (pause)

You: “Ah. (brightly) Say, what do you think of [insert topic here]?”

For stubborn cases, you may need to apply several different topic changes over the course of an evening.

I consider sex and religion too difficult to discuss in any professional or social/casual setting. – Rulane

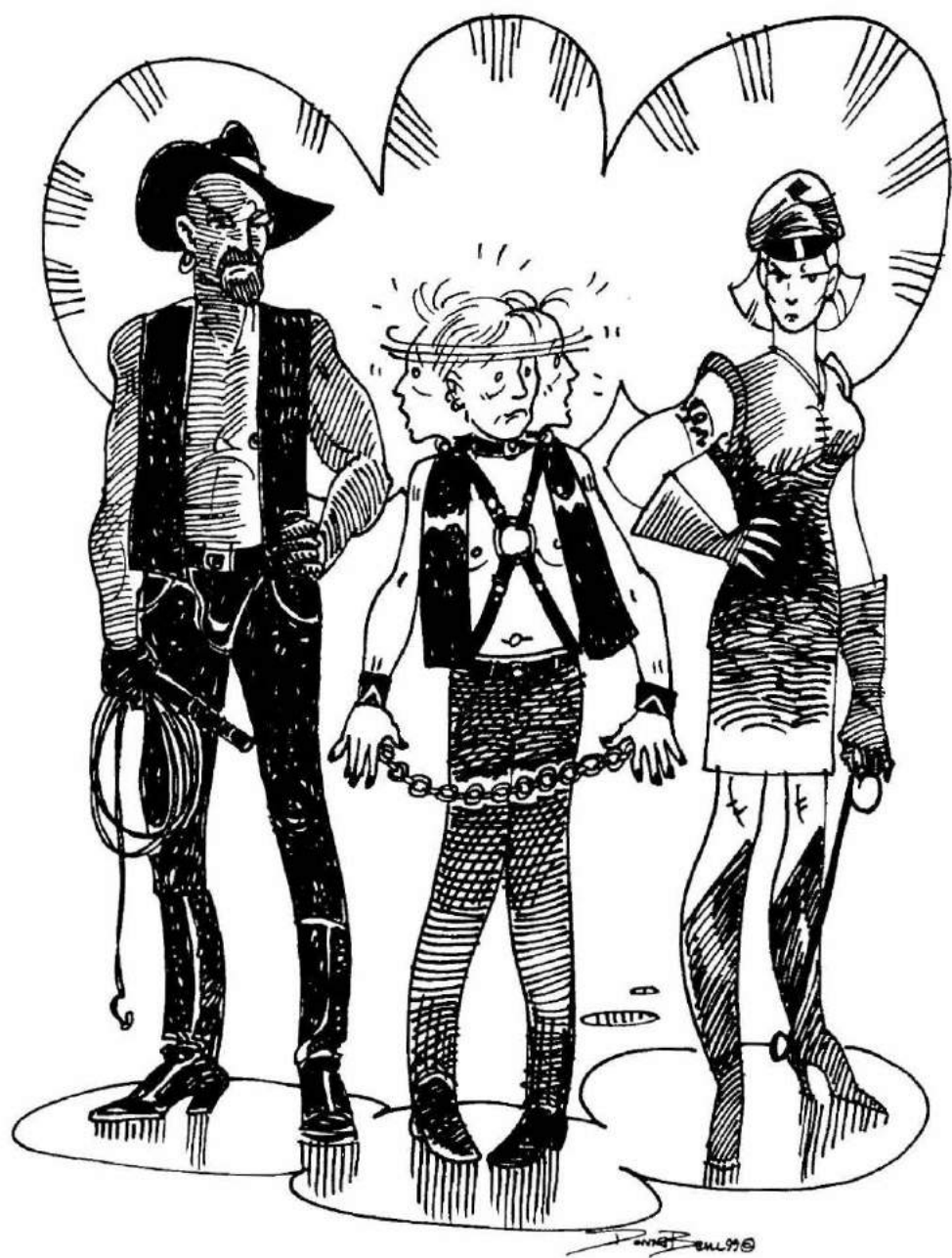
Smoke Gets in My Eyes

Q I have an unusual problem. I have a chronic illness, and my doctor has prescribed medicinal marijuana to help with pain and appetite. How do I go about taking my medicine if I'm at someone else's house or at a party?

A Medications, like other aspects of health care, are a private matter. If at all possible, try to schedule your medicating – or your socializing – so that you can take your meds in the privacy of your own home. When staying at a friend's house, do alert your host/ess about your medication. If they are uncomfortable with the prospect of medicinal marijuana use in their home, consider staying elsewhere. In any case, medications of all sorts should be taken in private and never shared. Should any would-be party pigs happen to barge in, simply explain that this is a prescribed medication, not a recreational drug, and so sharing is off-limits.

Oh, My Virgin Ears!

Q When is it okay to use “potty language”? I have several friends who cuss up a storm, and frankly, I find it offensive. They say I'm just stodgy. What are the rules here?



How should submissives act in the presence of several masters they play with? (p. 32)

A In some contexts, like locker rooms, swearing is to be expected. In most situations, however, the foul-mouthed should take their cue from others. Potty language, like smoking, is only acceptable when no one else objects. You have veto power here; use it, or find more genteel friends.

Excuse Me, Mr. Slave?

Q How do you speak to someone who is a slave?

A In a leather setting, you don't, at least not at first. Address yourself to his or her Owner, asking permission to speak directly to the slave. (Be aware that permission may be denied because of a previous agreement between Master and slave; it's probably nothing personal.) Outside of a leather setting, speak to a slave just as you would to anyone else: politely.

Divided Loyalties

Q How should submissives act in the presence of several masters they play with?

A Whenever possible, the "freelance" submissive should clarify with all potential partners their expectations about public protocol and act accordingly. ("Master, I believe that Mistress Kit may be attending this event, too. If we should run into her, do you wish me to acknowledge her?") If you are out with one Master, that person remains your focus, and unless other arrangements have been made, you cannot assume that you have permission to speak freely with others. Experienced dominants will expect that an unattached submissive may have more than one play partner, and your behavior (posture, language, perhaps clothing) will clue them in if you are "spoken for" at a given event.

If you are on your own at a leather event, you should show basic courtesy to all present, but for their part, your Masters should not assume that you are theirs unless you have made previous arrangements. Should you decide spontaneously to serve one person while at the event, that top

In the modern era, our problematic relationship with clothing reflects a contradiction of contemporary sensibilities – we use our clothes to express ourselves, but we balk if others use them to judge the self we choose to express. – Linda S. Lichter

should make clear their “claim” for the night by collaring you or otherwise showing their care for you. Anyone who then approaches you – including other Masters – should be directed to the top-of-the-night.

Clocked

Q I work in a setting where I come in contact with a lot of male-to-female TGs, and I’ve noticed that many of them don’t pass, not because of the way they look, but because of their mannerisms. The worst part is the ladies who can’t seem to speak at anything less than a bellow.

A What is the etiquette problem here? If you want to know how to tell them they’re not passing, the answer is that you can’t unless you’re in a professional counseling capacity or are a close friend asked for advice. (Besides, if they’re not passing, people with less tact than you have already let them know.) If people of any gender are being too loud, you can always ask them politely to pipe down.

And You Are...?: Determining Orientation

Survey says: We wanna know. One of the most frequently asked questions was, “How do I figure out someone else’s orientation/kink/relationship status/

People at work think I’m crazy because I like boys in dresses... I also dated a postal worker, which seems to frighten people. (He wore dresses too.)

gender identity/etc.” Since relatively few of us have this information tattooed on our foreheads, it’s no wonder people are confused. But at the same time, many people said that they fear being stereotyped or subjected to unwanted attention should everyone and their dog know about their orientation.

Folks, we can’t have it both ways. Before you go prying into someone else’s private life, ask yourself this question: Why do I want to know? And then this one: Would I want this person to ask me the same question?

A, B, or C?

Q What is the polite way to determine someone’s orientation? I often meet potential alternative relationship partners in a mainstream setting, but I never know how to approach them without giving offense.

A Because sexuality is a private matter in our culture, there is no polite way to ask a person what they like to do in bed and with whom – which is, of course, what orientation comes down to. What you can do is casually make clear your own orientation in the course of conversation and watch their reaction before making your move.

Are You... Together?

Q How do you inquire about someone's relationship status, if they haven't brought it up first?

A You don't. It's up to each individual to determine how much information s/he wants to disclose to a new acquaintance. If you want to know if someone's available, make your own status apparent and watch for signs of interest.

Silly Me!

Q How does one flirt with someone whose orientation, kinks, or relationship status aren't clear?

A The wonderful thing about flirting is that, done correctly, it is both unmistakable and easily denied. Flirt by making subtle allusions to your own interests. If the person is interested, they will inevitably give appropriate rejoinders.

You: I love the handcuffs on your jacket. *Babe:* Yeah? I lost the key a while back. You wouldn't happen to have one that might fit, would you?

If you get noncommittal answers – or worse yet, blank stares or hostile silences – move on.

Tie Me Up, Tie Me Down

Q How do you broach the subject of leather with a partner whose interest in alternative sex is unknown?

A Depending on your pattern of communication and level of intimacy with your partner, you can take one of two tacks. You can mention your kinks in a casual, noncommittal, "isn't-this-interesting" sort of way to gauge your partner's reactions, or you can come right out and declare your interests

unambiguously. The former is less risky and may seem less threatening; the latter wastes less time if the response is positive.

In either case, approach the issue at a time when both of you are relaxed and feeling open and affectionate. Avoid mentioning new activities right before or after sex, as your partner may take this as an implied criticism of his or her performance. Likewise, avoid bringing up your interest in leather when you're arguing, which will make your partner associate the topic with negative feelings. Instead, try one of the following openers:

- ✧ Mention a book or article about leather that you've enjoyed and offer to share it with your partner.
- ✧ Look at catalogs that feature leather toys with your partner.
- ✧ Rent a porn movie that includes sensual SM.
- ✧ Share an erotic SM story with your partner, or write your own.
- ✧ Attend a leather event, like a workshop or fund-raiser, with your partner.

In any case, be prepared for the possibility that your partner simply may not share your interest. On the other hand, be prepared for the possibility that s/he will!

Live or Memorex?

Q Is there a tactful way to ask if someone is transitioning or just dressing?

A Paying the person a compliment about their appearance will often elicit the information you're looking for.

You: "What a great dress! It's a wonderful look for you."

Zie: "Thanks. I just wish I had more chances to wear it out." (Person is dressing.)

or

Zie: "Thank you. Do you think it's too dressy for work?" (Person is transitioning.)

Shameless Self-Promotion

It's that time of year again... except that it's all year 'round. Letters and calls from friends you don't remember pour in. "This ride will be the greatest challenge of my life and it's all for the cause of beating this disease." "I've walked for the past four years, and every year I've been one of the top fund-raisers." "Your contribution will help queer visibility and promote pride." "I still haven't heard from you – won't you write a check now?"

Good causes all. About that there is no doubt. Yet how many of these letters are thrown, half-read, into the recycling bin by increasingly irate people? What was once a matter of grassroots activism has become big business.

There is nothing at all rude about giving to charity, of course. The problem comes with the tactics of fund-raisers who have forgotten – or never learned – how to beg politely. Community fund-raisers will therefore kindly observe the following guidelines:

- ⌘ Remember that no one owes you anything, no matter how good the cause. They have every right to say "no." Take it gracefully.
- ⌘ If you're going for the big numbers, target businesses rather than individuals.
- ⌘ No matter what the organizers tell you, sob stories and personal dramas don't make more money. Cut to the chase.
- ⌘ Don't burden friends and colleagues with multiple solicitations, particularly at the holidays.

A Dubious Cause

Q I recently received a piece of email that left me stunned. It was from a self-proclaimed "community leader" and author, whom, I should add, I do not know personally. Apparently, this person is suffering from some health problems and was sending out a request for financial support. Most of the letter consisted of whining about how little money this person made in royalties and how much volunteer time and money they'd spent on community issues. I do a lot of work for the community myself – but I also work full time and had the foresight to get medical insurance. Is it really my responsibility to provide for this person's poor planning?

A Some altsex communities, especially lesbian separatists and leatherfolk, have a strong ethic of mutual aid. This grows out of politics of cooperation and a belief – often, sadly, justified – that mainstream resources are less available to sexual outlaws. In those communities, it's not unusual for people to call in their chips when they are facing trouble. However, friends generally organize any fund-raisers so that the person in need is not reduced to outright begging.

In any case, you are never obligated – except by your own conscience – to make contributions to charity, no matter who does the asking. If you don't feel you can give in good faith, simply delete the email.

Misplaced Efforts

Q I am a single mother living on public assistance. Someone I'd met only once at a leather event wrote to me and asked for a (sizable) donation to help them take part in an AIDS fund-raising event. I don't have any money to contribute, a fact which this person knew about. I truly wish I could help, but I resent this kind of begging, particularly when I need charity more than many of my friends with AIDS.

A While I agree that the request was misplaced and even insensitive given your circumstances, you are under no obligation to send money just because someone asks. If you want, you can send a note to the person explaining that, while you cannot make a contribution, you wish her well in her fund-raising efforts.

RULE 2: DEFINE YOURSELF. NOT OTHERS.

Nouns: A Necessary Evil

Everyone agrees that being labeled is an unpleasant experience: so why are we so quick to subject others to it?

Identity is a composite, an equation that consists of the sum total of our individual affiliations, multiplied by our humanity, then divided by the inability of language to express such complexity concisely. What we are often left with is a bunch of labels – which, incidentally, is exactly what the word “etiquette” originally meant. (Both “etiquette” and the English word “ticket” derive from the Middle French “etiquet” meaning a notice attached to something, labeling or designating it.) A label-free world is neither possible nor, ultimately, desirable, but we can certainly make nouns our friends by following the principles outlined in this chapter.

Our society puts too much faith in the false god called Nouns. This god is not worthy of such devotion and will reward ze’s followers only with betrayal. Prolly at a really inconvenient time. – Mark Phemister

The basic rule here is simple in theory, but very, very difficult in practice. Let people identify themselves as they want to, and follow suit when referring to them. This isn’t just PC blather; it’s the only way to avoid offense in a world full of people just waiting to take it.

Rigor Mortis

Q Could you please tell people how not to choose stupid labels for themselves?

A I think you're referring to what I call "Death by Hyphenation." This is the attempt to create a label that will encompass every single aspect of one's identity – especially those that confer "minority" status and the attendant perks. The result looks something like the signs in German railway stations: by the time you've figured them out, you've missed your connection. Even more ridiculous is the proliferation of "of clauses" to describe identity. We've moved from the PC "person of color" (as if people of European descent were transparent) to – and I wish I were making this up – a woman describing herself in a major lesbian magazine as a "Lesbian of Poverty."

The game of "More Oppressed Than Thou" is both unattractive and fruitless. Etiquette, as a system of collectively agreed-upon standards, teaches that positive change comes from positive example. Become a hyphenation refusenik. But until the hyphenfree revolution catches on, you must let others call themselves what they will, no matter how foolish the results.

Wouldn't You Like to Be a Pepper, Too?

Q I am a homosexual of a certain age, and I am continuously appalled by the behavior of so-called liberated queers. The spectacle of "Gay Pride" fills me with horror. How can I dissociate myself from these people?

A When others comment on the behavior you disdain, say, "One of the things I love about this community is its diversity. There's room for people like that, and for old-fashioned fellows like myself." If you repeat this sentiment often enough, you may one day find that you have come to believe it.

People have allowed me to speak for myself – Kory Martin-Damon

Woman-Lovin' Women

Q What is the difference between a lesbian and a gay woman?

A About \$30,000 a year. (Ba-da boom!) Observers have noticed – and your humble servant is among them – that women who call themselves "gay" rather than "lesbian" tend to be of a slightly older vintage than the rest of their sisters, or are used to being "one of the boys" in the business world. Lesbian theorists have pointed out that using the term "gay" eclipses women the same way that words like "mankind" for "humans" or "he" for "one"

do. The majority of women do seem to prefer “lesbian,” although one should always use the term that a given woman favors when describing her.

In queer society, a further distinction is made between “lesbians” and “dykes.” Again, “lesbians” are understood to be more conservative, and perhaps older, than their dyke counterparts. “Dyke,” like “fag,” is a reclaimed epithet and carries a connotation of progressive politics, radical sexuality, and urban chic. Like “the n-word” among blacks, it should not be used by outsiders, and only cautiously otherwise.

Around friends I’m more likely to describe myself as a dyke or queer, but to my parents it’s lesbian. More polite, no chance of misunderstanding. – Alanna McCormack

Straightening Things Out

Q When is it appropriate to call someone “straight”? I referred to one of my heterosexual girlfriends this way, and she got all up in arms.

A It might interest you to know that only one person out of the 400 who answered my etiquette survey used the word “straight” to describe herself – but there were many people who called themselves “heterosexual” or even “het.”

Although gay men and lesbians often refer to their non-queer counterparts as “straight,” clearly the people in question aren’t very happy with the label. In the 1960s, “straight” meant Establishment with a capital “E,” and for many altsexers, the term still sounds distinctly unhip – hence the occasional quip, “I’m straight, but not narrow.” “Het,” presumably the opposite of “homo,” is another reclaimed term, to be used carefully if at all by others. When in doubt, say “heterosexual.”

My partner and some other men in my life have been very supportive of my involvement in woman-only activities, for which I am very grateful. – Dax Altair

Bi-Bi. Baby

Q Why do some TGs object to the term “bisexual”?

A Because it implies that there are only two sexes, which the experience of some transgendered folks belies. Alternatives include “pansexual” and “omnisexual.”

Graeco-Roman Holiday

Q What's the difference between "pansexual" and "omnisexual"?

A The linguistic source of the root. "Pan" comes from Greek, and "omni" comes from Latin; both mean "all." In practice, "pansexual" is much more common, and is often used by people who are open to sex with people of any gender or orientation.

The Dirtiest Word

Listen: "He's not *really* a top, you know." "She's not *really* butch." "You can't *really* be a man unless you have a penis." "She's not *really* a lesbian; she used to be married."

Being treated like a second-class citizen by many dykes because I have voluntary contact with penis people really, really toasts my Pop Tarts.

Oh, really?

Now listen again: "He's not *really* white, you know." "She's not *really* management material, but with those looks..." "He's not *really* one of us; he's got a Jewish grandfather."

Any questions? I thought not.

What's Sex Got to Do With It?

Q What's the etiquette for fag-dyke sex and other "not supposed to happen" situations? I recently had a sex-only fling with a close dyke buddy, and now suddenly my other friends are calling me "bisexual" – which I'm not. How can I get the point across that who I have sex with is my own business and doesn't change my identity?

A If these people are your friends, have a heart-to-heart with them. Explain that their apparent need to deny you the right to identify yourself is mis-

Comment: Would I still be a lesbian if I dated you? Response: Are you still a lesbian when you're not dating anybody? – Mark Phemister

guided and hurtful. Every time they misidentify you, correct them: "No, Cheryl, I'm not bisexual. I'm a fag." It may take a while, but once they've gotten over the "thrill factor," they may realize that sex between a fag and a dyke is still pretty darn queer.



What's the etiquette for fag-dyke sex? (p. 41)

Identity and Altsex Culture: Free to Be... Just Like Everybody Else

There is an enormous variety of subcultures within the altsex world. Finding one's ecological niche is vitally important, as it determines the group from which friends and potential partners will be drawn. This is, of course, no different from the non-altsex world, where polo players don't usually frequent monster truck rallies. The rules of behavior and rites of passage can differ greatly, leading to the inevitable etiquette quandaries.

Aw. Mom! Lentil Loaf Again?

Q I've always wanted to ask someone this question: What's with all the potlucks in the lesbian community?

A Trust me, it's not an undying love of tofu. There seem to be two origins of the potluck, one political and one practical. First, lesbian-feminist theory places a high value on cooperative efforts. Second, lower wages for women can mean less disposable income in households with no male breadwinner. But at this point, we may just as well lay the blame at the door of Dame Tradition.

The Classless Potluck

Lesbian potluck dinners – some of the strangest food I have ever eaten. – I.

Q Thanksgiving is coming up, and I'm having about half a dozen of my friends over for dinner. I plan to serve mashed potatoes as part of the traditional spread. (I'm also making lasagna for the vegetarians.) The problem is that one of my friends says that she can't imagine Thanksgiving without those potato flakes that come in a box. She's willing to bring them herself – several other people are bringing side dishes as well – and she's really adamant. I think they're revolting, and I'd be embarrassed to have them on my table. What should I do?

I don't need to be like you to like you. – Sage

A Let her bring them. As you may have surmised, this conflict has less to do with the realities of flavor than it does with your rela-

tive classes. You aren't obligated to eat the things, but be gracious and serve them alongside your own potatoes. To avoid this kind of conflict in the future, remember that when you invite people to dinner, you're responsible for the food – all of it. By making your Thanksgiving dinner a semi-potluck, you relinquish control over what appears on your sideboard. Now pass the Jell-O™ mold.

"Ms. Labiablossom to a white courtesy phone..."

Q Why do so many lesbians have goofy names? A friend just announced that she's changing her name to "Mariah Labiablossom," and I just can't say it without laughing.

A Just be glad she's not a leatherperson and clergy, or she'd be the Reverend Grand High Mastress Mariah Labiablossom!

When people enter a new phase of life – whether it's getting married or entering a convent – they often take a new name to mark their commitment. Lesbians may have special reasons for doing so.

Since English speakers generally use patronymics – the father's last name – some lesbians choose to take their mother's name or some other woman-identified moniker to show their solidarity with womankind. Taking a new name can also be a way of distancing yourself from a family that may well have disowned you. It's also a convenient way to ditch a name that doesn't fit: how many butch dykes have been saddled with hopelessly girly names? (If you meet a lesbian who goes by initials or a short nickname – Jo or F.J. – you can bet her given name is Josephina or Felicity Jill.) Finally, political radicals may take a nom de guerre to protect their families and to keep the FBI guessing.

You'd be amazed how quickly you can get used to almost any name, no matter how odd. Just keep saying it out loud – in private, please – until you can do so without laughing.

As an out lesbian, I find that people are surprised that I'm not a man-hater. – Ruth

Sisterhood Ain't That Global

Q I recently placed an order for a T-shirt from a lesbian-owned company. After eight weeks had gone by, and no shirt, I wrote a letter asking what was

going on. (They had cashed my check.) No response. Finally I called the Better Business Bureau, and then I got a nasty letter back from the company with a refund (minus a “service charge” for canceling my order) and a whole lot of tripe about “sisterhood” and how I was “part of the patriarchal dysfunction” for calling the BBB.

A The company you had the misfortune to deal with has clearly confused the lesbian value of cooperation and mutual assistance with the free-market ethic of “the customer is always right.” You are under no obligation, political

or moral, to patronize a business that treats its customers poorly, regardless of the gender or orientation of the owners.

If all women who had a bad experience with a man became dykes, there would be no straight women left. Really. — Elaine Miller

Gentlemen, Start Your Engines

Q I’m a butch dyke who adores femmes. I just don’t know how to act around them. Whenever I try to be gentlemanly, I end up looking like a macho pig.

A The key to gentlemanly behavior is to remember your place: you’re there to make her feel like the goddess she is. Worry less about how you appear and more about her comfort, and you’ll be in business. For specific hints, see *How to Be a Gentleman* by John Bridges. (Much of his advice applies equally to ladies.)

Lady’s Choice

Q I know a lot of lesbians who hate the term “wife” and tell other lesbians that they’re “supporting the patriarchy” by using it. How should my wife — her preferred term — and I deal with them?

A A cold stare sounds about right. (See p. 109.) If you must explain, keep it brief: “Allison prefers the term ‘wife,’ and *of course* I respect her choices.” By emphasizing “of course” you give your PC friends the subtle hint that they, too, owe your wife the same courtesy.

Sometimes Size Does Count

Q What’s the definition of a size queen?

A Anyone who wants more than you've got.

"All Them Queers Look Alike"

Q What is a clone? Is it bad to be one?

A "Clone" is the term for whatever the going style for gay men is at the moment. In the '70s, there were "sweater fags." In the late '80s, everyone wore urban politico gear à la ACT UP; by the '90s it was the ubiquitous goatee. No one admits to being a clone, but the fact that the style is instantly identifiable in any gay ghetto speaks volumes.

My former best friend told me I was not able to give authentic consent to being submissive because women through the centuries have been programmed to take abuse. I told her that if women could consent to have an abortion, we could surely consent to getting a spanking.

Opera Queen for a Day

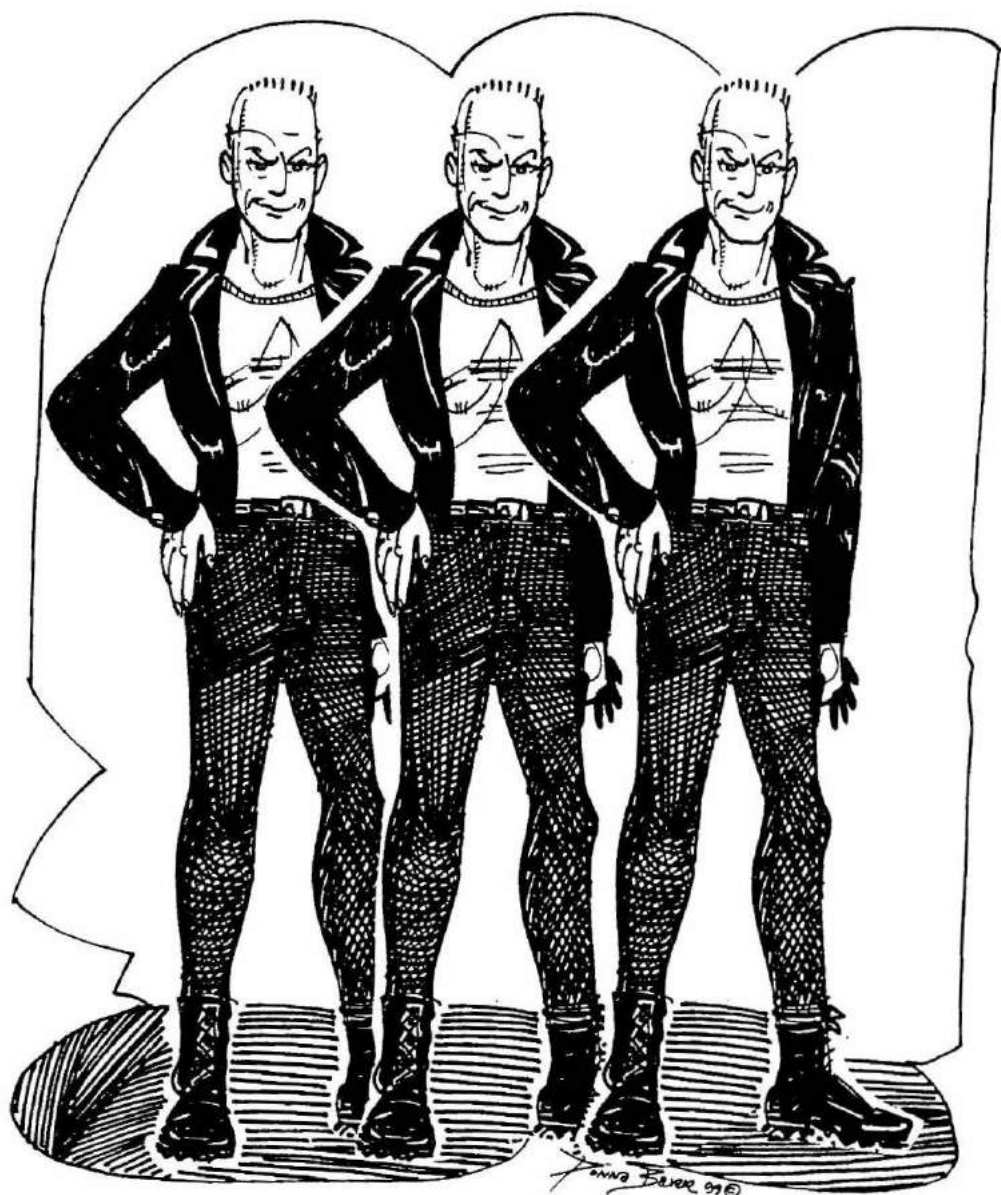
Q Recently I've been hanging out with a great group of guys. The problem is that every time we get together, they end up talking about opera. I don't know Callas from Clint Eastwood. I'm not even sure I like opera.

A Like dry martinis and bow ties, opera is an acquired taste. (Then, come to think of it, so are fisting and hot motor oil massage.) Ask one of your new friends to introduce you to the wonders of grand opera. He'll be flattered that you consider him an expert, and you may discover in time that all that stratospheric shrieking and over-the-top drama thrills you to the tips of your patent-leather opera pumps. But should you find that it all leaves you flat, and your buddies aren't interested in anything else, move on to a more congenial group of friends.

"No Pecs. No Sex"? No Way.

Q A friend of mine started working out and now all he talks about are his pecs. I find the details of other people's exercise routines unspeakably dull. What should I do?

A Friendships are based on shared interests, life experiences, and the intimacy they foster. The next time your *sportif* friend brings up his new obsession, try changing the subject. If after a few attempts you realize that you no



What is a clone? (p. 46)

longer have any shared interests, then this person may have left the category of “friend” and moved into the category of “bore.”

Try Again

Q How do I disabuse someone of their mistaken notion that I’m gay/straight?

A You can either come right out and say it – “Jerry, I’m gay, you know” – or slip the information into your conversation in a nonprovocative but unmistakable way.

Mr. Cluefree: What did you do this weekend? *You:* I went to see “Torch Song Trilogy.” I wasn’t out in the ’70s, but that movie really educated me about my community’s history.

Alma Mater... or Is It Pater?

Q How do I politely inform people that I haven’t seen for a while that my orientation has changed? I’ll be attending my tenth college reunion soon, and in the decade between graduation and now, I’ve stopped

identifying as a lesbian and have married a wonderful man. I don’t regret my relationships with women, but that’s just not who I am anymore.

A There are two ways to get the point across to old college chums with whom you haven’t been in contact for a while. First, if he’s willing, bring your husband with you to the reunion. (Yes, you will owe him forever for enduring this event with you, but so be it.) If he can’t or won’t attend, treat your wedding as a conversation opener to get the news out in the air quickly.

You: Mabel, it’s so wonderful to see you again. *Mabel:* So what have you been up to? *You:* Well, the big news is that I got married two years ago. Mark wasn’t able to attend tonight – he had a business trip – but he’s a wonderful guy. I’m sure you’d like him. And what’s new in your life?

Notice that you manage to get the information across in a matter-of-fact way without blathering on about your husband. (No doubt he’s a catch, but endless catalogues of a lover’s charms make for tedious conversation, and under the circumstances, could be seen as an attempt to justify your deci-

I was talking with a coworker, telling her about my boyfriend. Twice in a row she said, “You mean ‘girlfriend’” ... so in a somewhat exasperated tone, I said, “Louise, I’m gay! I mean boyfriend.” – Robert Morley

sions.) Then you ask a question that shows your interest in your old friend's life while not leaving an opening for prying questions about your own.

Rewriting History

Q I recently offended a friend of mine, who is a male-to-female transsexual, by referring to her as such. This was in a private setting, so I wasn't "outing" her – why was she upset?

A Your friend may feel that, once the practical matters of gender transition are over, that she is a woman, pure and simple. She may not want to dwell on the difficulties of her previous life. Reassure her that you do not see her as "less than" because of her past – then take care not to mention the matter again.

Preslo. Change-o

Q Someone I used to know well appears to have changed their gender. How do I politely ask their name?

Being transgender feels like being on the bottom rung of the ladder; even the dykes and fags may give me shit.
– Renee

A Say, "I think we met years ago, but I'm afraid I've forgotten your name. I'm Mick." Then smile, and stick out your hand. This way, you've clued the person in to the fact that you knew them before their transition – so they don't have to come out to you – but that you also respect their privacy.

Can I Get Some Service Here?

Q How should a butch dyke deal with people in the men's department who won't wait on her? I only wear men's clothes, but I have a hard time getting service in stores.

A Calm persistence is the key here. Place yourself directly in front of a salesperson, and say firmly, "I'd like some help choosing a suit, please." If the salesperson tries to direct you to another department, simply say, "No, I find that the clothes in this department are more comfortable for me. I was thinking about something in navy..." If you get no response, repeat your request politely. If you are still having trouble, ask to speak to a manager,

and mention that you had planned to make a purchase but that because you weren't served, you will be taking your business elsewhere. Then do so.

Wonders and Miracles

Q I'm an MTF, and while I pass most of the time, I have a really hard time in stores, both with the salespeople and with the other shoppers. Buying a bra – and I do need them – is hell. How can I tell people to mind their own business?

A If possible, bring a girlfriend with you when you shop for lingerie. Women often shop in pairs, and people are less likely to be snide when there are witnesses. If your friend is a genetic girl, so much the better. Bring a bra with you that fits well, and ask to see others in a similar style and size. Being matter-of-fact about your needs goes a long way to dispelling confusion. Ignore any comments; a lady does not deign to acknowledge such nonsense. (Of course, any outright rudeness on the part of a salesperson should be reported to the management immediately.)

I tend to brazen situations out. I might be hurt by what folks say about me, but I try never to let them see it. – Melora

Maintaining composure in the face of prejudice is no easy task, but it's one that all women face on a daily basis. Every time you exhibit grace under pressure, you make the world a safer place, not only for yourself, but for all women – even the ones who may be harassing you. Stand tall.

You Seem to Have Mistaken Me for Your Mother

Q I'm a man with a high voice, and people are constantly "ma'aming" me on the phone. How should I respond?

A Make a habit of beginning all phone conversations by identifying yourself with your title and last name. Even the most clueless people will have a hard time saying "Ma'am" to someone named "Mr. Abercrombie." (This also allows you to act as a conscientious objector to the distressing modern practice of calling everyone by first names from the get-go.)

If the person still isn't taking the hint, you may be forced to say, "I'm sorry, but you seem to have mistaken me for a woman." Then repeat, "This is Mr. Abercrombie, Mr. Michael Abercrombie." You may then have to en-

Comment: You don't act gay. Response: I'm sorry – shall I shriek more often?

sure some embarrassed excuses and comments about your voice. To these, you reply with a non-committal, “Ah,” or “Is it? I hadn't noticed.”

Mistaken Identities

Q What should I do when someone has misinterpreted my gender?

A Very often, a blank or confused look will do the trick; you might add, “I'm sorry, were you talking to me?” If the person is genuinely confounded, be merciful and say simply, “It's Ma'am (Sir).”

If you strongly suspect malicious intent, say “I'm sorry, but I think you've mistaken me for another person. I'm Ms. Jones.” This should be said in a clear voice and loud enough for the people in the immediate area to hear. Witnesses will make a bully back down.

Hey Youse Guys

Q I was at a restaurant recently with two other TS ladies. We all look clearly female, but when the waiter came over to the table, he asked, “Are you guys ready to order?” I was offended; my friends say I'm being too sensitive.

A In today's speech, “you guys” is genderless. It's also graceless. So while there's no need to defend your womanly honor, in the future you may want to choose a restaurant where the servers are better trained.

Oh. Mary!

Q I'm an FTM. The other day I was in a gay-owned store, and one of the workers referred to me as “she.” I have a full beard and a flat chest. What am I doing wrong?

A Nothing at all. It's not uncommon for gay men to say “she” to each other or talk about “girlfriends” – meaning other gay men. They probably just assumed you were gay, you hot stud!

Whazzat?

Q How do I determine someone's gender if it's unclear?

A Before you worry yourself about someone else's gender, ask yourself this question: Why do I need to know? Personal curiosity isn't enough; the other person's privacy is more important than your desire to pry. Will knowing their gender affect how you treat them? (If you think the answer to that is self-evident, try substituting "race" for "gender" and think again.) If you still think you really, truly need to know, just ask: "What pronoun do you prefer?" or "Do you prefer Sir or Ma'am?"

Comment: Why would you want to be a man? Response: I don't want to be a man, I am a man. The rest is a birth defect. – Alex-Michael Rodgers

Verbal Banana Peels

Q What is the proper way to apologize for using the wrong pronoun to refer to someone? Several of my friends have transitioned in the past year, and I sometimes still slip.

A Keep your apologies quick and to the point. Make eye contact and say, "I'm sorry, Joanne." Then move on. Over-apologizing or trying to make excuses for your slip only makes matters more awkward.

A Royal Prerogative

Q How do you deal politely with your packer* falling out of your trouser leg in public where many of the attending think you are a bio male?

A Take heart in the fact that you are not the first person to face such an embarrassment. A medieval anecdote – possibly apocryphal, but well-loved anyway – tells that when the Countess of Salisbury's garter fell to the floor during a court ball, King Edward retrieved it, tied it around his own leg, and exclaimed, "Shame on the one who thinks evil of it! I shall turn it into the most honoured garter ever worn!" He went on to found the Order of the Garter, still one of the most prestigious chivalric orders in the world.

So simply scoop up the item and put it in your pocket. If someone asks, give them a wicked grin and say, "*Honi soit qui mal y pense*" – for Edward

* An item worn in the underwear to produce the appearance of a masculine crotch.

Someone outed me as trans in front of a group of men wearing Promise Keeper T-shirts. Eeek!

delivered his *bon mot* in French, the language of the court in his time. By the time the baffled on-lookers figure out what it means, you'll be long gone.

The Forgotten Gender

Q What is the difference between someone who's intersexed and someone who's transsexual?

A Intersexed people, formerly referred to as "hermaphrodites," are born with primary sex characteristics that are a mixture of the more common male and female ones. Tragically, many have their genitals surgically "corrected" shortly after birth, which can lead to pain and reduced erotic sensation. Many are raised as girls, although they may develop male secondary sex characteristics at puberty. Some choose to live in the gender they were socialized in; others change gender; still others live between genders.

Transsexuals are people who undergo some form of gender modification, usually as adults. This may include hormone therapy and various sur-

Direct, polite questions are so nice.
It's hard to live with the silence.
- Kate

geries to help create greater congruence between the individual's physical body and their perception of their own gender.

Not all intersexed people change gender; most transsexuals are not physically intersexed.

Wave It High

Q How can a femme who doesn't wear jeans flag?*

A Here are just a few suggestions:

✂ Tie a bandanna around your purse strap and carry it on the appropriate side.

✂ If you're a switch, you can wear the bandanna as a neck scarf or in your hair.

* "Flagging" refers to the use of visual signs, such as key chains or colored bandannas, to signal interest in a particular sexual activity or role. Wearing the item on the left says "I'm a top"; on the right, "I'm a bottom."



How can a femme flag? (p. 53)

- ✂ Make the bandanna into a bracelet and wear it on your right or left wrist.
- ✂ If you're crafty, make miniature bandannas out of polymer clay and use them as earrings.

Boys Will Be Boys?

- Q** I am often mistaken for a bottom because I have a boyish-looking appearance and hang out with a lot of dominant women. I've even been told that there's "no way" I could be a Daddy; I must "really" be a boy.
- A** Phooey. Raise an eyebrow and give those naysayers a steady, cold look that says, "Too bad you'll never know what you're missing."

Grand Master Gorgelfetch to You

- Q** If someone calls himself "Master X," but he's not my Master, how should I address him?
- A** This is a case in which one rule – self-definition – is overridden by another – consent. Leather titles imply a specific relationship between the person using the title and the person referred to by the title. Calling someone "Master" is a privilege to be earned; being called "Master" is a responsibility not to be entered into lightly. People need to get over the idea that the title makes the Master. I know very few experienced leathermen (or -women) who would be offended by being called by their social title and last name by someone who didn't know them. If confronted with a person who usually uses a title as part of their name, you can say, "I hope you don't mind if I call you Mr. Smith; I don't want to presume to call you Master when we don't have that sort of relationship."

If the person refers to themselves as "Master Joe," you may choose to refer to them in the third person in this way, or you may just use their given and last names together: "Joe Manly is MC-ing the Mr. San Cilantro Leatherstud contest tonight."

En Garde

- Q** What's the difference between Old Guard and New Guard Leather? How does one become one or the other? Does it matter?

A Frankly, I still haven't figured out what all these people are guarding against.

Old Guard leatherfolk wish to maintain a strong connection to the history of the leather community. There was a time when the community was very much underground. Becoming a leatherperson didn't just mean that you had kinky sex; it implied a whole set of values and commitments to others. (Gayle Rubin has written about the Old Guard, and I recommend her work highly.) Old Guard leather is generally associated with hierarchy, mentoring, learning to top by bottoming, and deeply committed alternative "leather families." Old Guard leather may be extremely private as well.

The New Guard is more eclectic; the keynote here is kink for kink's sake. New Guard values innovation, humor, open information exchange, and experimentation. The New Guard is as likely to have learned about leather from books and public workshops as from a respected Master or Mistress. New Guard is postmodern leather, out and proud.

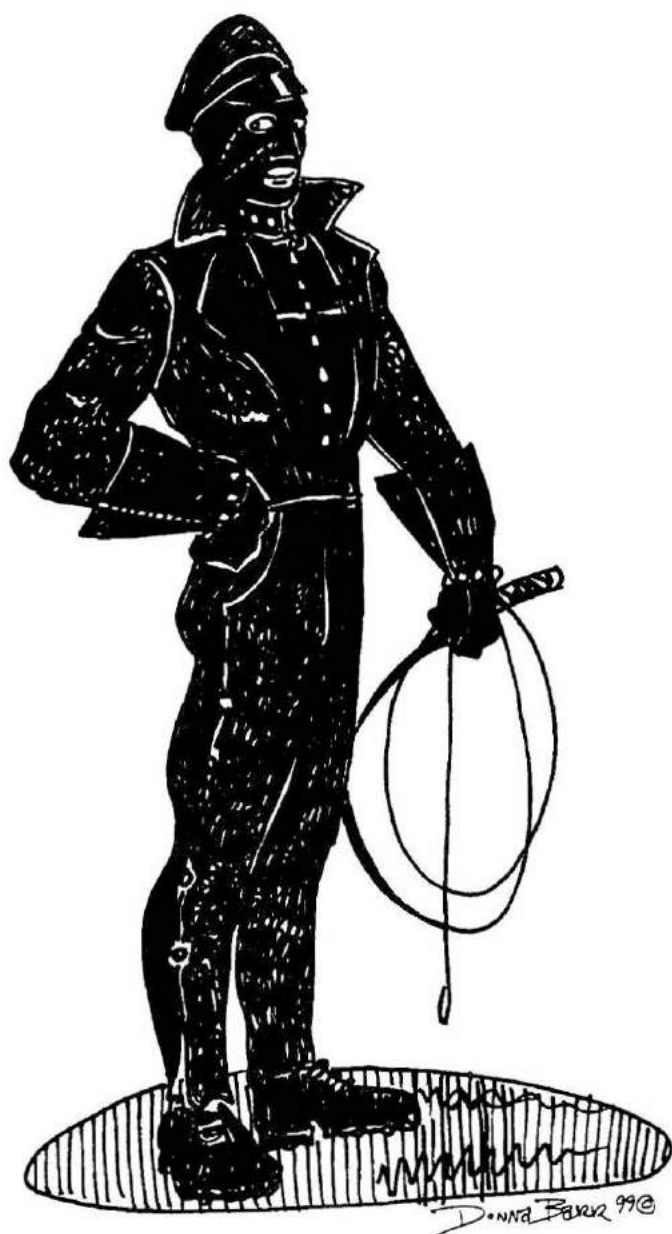
If you hang around the leather community for long enough, you will inevitably hear some grumbling. The Old Guard get frustrated with "those wannabes," and the New Guard get annoyed with being told over and over how intense things were in the old days. While the Old Guard would do well to let go of the expectation that everyone under 40 should kowtow to them just because they were there when, the New Guard would greatly benefit from some historical perspective. As always, mutual courtesy will stand you in good stead no matter which side of the leather divide you find yourself on.

Although i consider myself a true submissive, i don't really relate to the Leather community at all. - danny

Stand & Model?

Q I see a lot of young people wearing bondage collars these days. How do I determine if they're in the scene or just fashion victims?

A Watch their behavior. If you are in a social setting, you might say quietly, "I like your collar," with a meaningful smile. If they say, "Uh, thanks," and nothing more, they're probably just striving for the look *du jour*. If they blush prettily and say, "Oh, thank you. It was a gift," with a longing look at someone across the room, you've discovered a happy - and spoken-for - submissive.



How do I determine if they're in the scene or just fashion victims? (p. 56)

Be aware, too, that some dominants wear “dress” collars. These usually have no D-ring on the front and do not lock. In any case, never touch a person’s collar – and certainly don’t grab it – unless you have clear, express permission to do so.

Ultimate Realness or On with the Show?

Q Do drag queens get off on wearing women’s clothes?

A While drag queens certainly enjoy their costumes, drag isn’t about erotic gratification. The focus is on camp: socially relevant humor that shows up our all-too-human natures by exaggeration. Drag pokes fun at stereotypes – about gender, about queerness, about art. In short, drag is cross-dressing as satiric performance art.

Miss Behavior?

Q Isn’t drag inherently sexist?

Comment: Don’t you just want to be a man? Response: Not tonight.

A To the extent that drag makes fun of our ideas about femininity and masculinity – making us look at them in a new light – it actually works to subvert sexist stereotypes.

Talk to My Agent

Q Why do drag queens and kings have such funny names?

A Like other artists, most drag performers adopt a stage name – or several, if they play multiple characters. In general, when a drag queen is dressed, it is polite to call that person by her stage name and refer to her with feminine pronouns. (Likewise, drag kings are “he” as long as they’re dressed.)

The Oldest Profession

Q When I was younger, there were gigolos and call girls. Now everyone is a “sex worker.” Why is that?

A “Sex work” has been widely adopted to cover all forms of employment in which the worker uses his/her body (including his/her voice) for the sexual gratification of his/her clients. It has the advantage of being inclusive, clear, and morally neutral (not all forms of sex work are illegal, after all).

Describing the Scribe

Q I write pornography. I recently referred to myself as a sex worker at a conference on lesbian sexuality, and several prostitutes got very offended because they said I wasn’t in the same class as they are since I don’t use my body sexually in my work.

A You have to admit they have a point. There is a real distinction between a call girl and someone who rents videos or sells sex toys. “Sex industry worker” describes what you do more accurately.

Ho. Ho. Ho? No.

Q I have a friend who is a stripper. She sometimes refers to her coworkers as “sluts” or “whores.” Isn’t this impolite?

A The terms “slut,” “whore,” “bitch,” and “ho” are sometimes jokingly used among sex workers. That doesn’t mean that other people should use them. As with the “n-word,” the potential for offense is very high. Stick with the more genteel “sex worker” or name the specific job (erotic dancer, escort, call girl) if you must.

By Any Other Name

Q I recently offended a professional dominant by referring to her as a “sex worker.” I thought that was the correct term for what she does.

A While many dominants claim the “sex worker” label proudly, others reject it. If you define “sex” solely in terms of genital contact, then many professional dominants do not in fact have sex with their clients. The woman you inadvertently offended is probably trying to distance herself from illegal forms of eroticism-for-pay.

A Three-Letter Word?

Q What is the appropriate way to refer to a fat person?

A By their name. Oh, that's not what you meant, is it? When it is necessary to discuss another person's physical appearance at all – which is far less often than most people seem to think – the correct word is “fat.” Etiquette generally disapproves of gussied-up language when plain English will do. In traditional etiquette, for example, there are no “limos,” only cars; no “tuxes,” only dinner jackets; no “cocktails,” only drinks.

The problem here, of course, is that obscenely long automobiles won't be offended if you call them cars, but those on the receiving end of the word “fat” know that it is often wielded like a blunt instrument,

implying everything from pity to moral condemnation. Fat activists are working to help both fat people and others to drain this simple word of its emotional charge and return it to the realm of the plain old adjective.

So while “fat” should not be considered a swear word, some people do still object to it. You should of course honor the wishes of a person who prefers another term, such a BBW (Big Beautiful Woman) or supersize. (The latter usually refers to people who wear clothing sizes larger than those readily available, even in “big and tall” or “plus size” stores.) “Person of size,” although logically meaningless – who doesn't have a size? – is another term some people use. For the sake of Lady Etiquette, indulge them.

I am sick of people insulting my fat lovers and suggesting to them that they are queer because they couldn't get a real man.

Say Amen. Somebody!

Q How can a religious queer deal with people who assume they must be guilt-ridden or closeted to be active in their church or synagogue?

A By simply being your devoted and open-minded self, you can lay a lot of stereotypes to rest. Casually mention the queer-positive groups and leaders in your denomination or movement. If your friends share your

Sometimes people assume that i had to have been sexually abused to have become a dyke. – The Nymph

religious background but have been away from church or shul for a while, invite them to a social event or a service.

"Paging Moonshine Waffleflower to the Information Booth..."

Q Can you please explain why so many Pagans have weird names? Every other Pagan woman I meet is named something like "Ravensun" or "Amberfyre."

A There's a joke Pagans tell about this: What's the best way to meet women at a Pagan convention? Have "Morgana" paged – half the place will show up.

Like lesbians, Pagans may take on a new name as a way of showing their commitment to their community or to distance themselves from an unaccepting biological family. In addition, some Pagan traditions use "Craft names" that are imbued with magical power or mark an affinity with a deity, animal, stone, or plant. Craft names also help maintain the anonymity of Pagans who are forced to remain in the broom closet.

Who's That Girl?

Q When we got married, I took my partner's last name (her maiden name), but our daughter – my partner's child from when she was married to her daughter's father – has another name. We routinely get cards addressed to the wrong names and some people even assume that we're sisters. How can we clear up these misunderstandings?

For some reason people are always shocked that my husband and I don't have the same last name. When they question it, I respond, "Yes, I let him keep his maiden name." – Kim Affica

A By being clear and consistent in your own usage. When you send out holiday or birthday cards, make sure you sign them with all of your full names. Get writing paper printed up with your names and use it for all of your social correspondence. Refer to your partner as such consistently. Eventually, people will get the hint.

The Ring's No Longer the Thing

Q How do you know when a couple is "serious"? When I was growing up, there were two kinds of people: single and married. Now there are all kinds of variations, and I just can't keep up.

A Traditional etiquette acknowledges the categories you mention, plus a few others – the widowed and the divorced, for example – but as you’ve noticed, the world is a lot more complicated than most etiquetteers want to admit. Because we are now aware that some committed couples (not to mention polyamorous menages) are not legally able to marry, we’ve expanded our notion of commitment to include them.

In the absence of white lace and bouquet-tossing, it is reasonable to assume that two people who have been “keeping company” and then move in together are to be considered a couple for social purposes. Unless otherwise advised, hosts should invite both parties to events, and acquaintances should politely inquire about the one when meeting the other.

It is the couple’s obligation to make their arrangements clear enough to the rest of their social circle that no confusion arises. So when you rent that U-Haul, drop a change of address card in the mail to your friends and family that conveys the important details:

Ms. Drusilla Ramsbottom and Ms. Agatha Orgeldroop have moved!
Their new address is 1 Lovers Lane, Wimmisland, MI.

“Single” is so couple-centric, don’t you agree? – NBarnes

SO?: The Ultimate Etiquette Quandary

Q What’s the correct term for that person you share a bed and a checking account with, but who may be of the same gender and to whom you have made a commitment but are not necessarily legally married?

A You – and half the other people who answered my survey – have just asked the \$64,000 question. Luckily for me, many of the survey respondents also kindly told me what they call their... you-knows. In approximate order of frequency, here are the answers:

- ⌘ partner
- ⌘ lover
- ⌘ girlfriend/boyfriend
- ⌘ friend
- ⌘ their name (no label)

People assume I’m a lesbian. I refer to my lover as my lover, not my “boyfriend.” Everyone seems confused and taken off guard, including me, when I introduce him: a somewhat fey but otherwise straight-looking guy.

⌘ significant other or SO (pronounced ess-oh)

⌘ husband/wife (even if not legally married)

⌘ spouse

Other responses included: otherlove, sweetie, beloved, ladylove, “my (insert name here),” main squeeze, roommate, and um-friend (as in “This is my, um, friend.”).

Despite its business-like tone, “partner” was by far the most popular term, and it even seems to have made its way into the legal system in the form of “partner benefits.” Some people augment it for clarity: if the person one shares a business with is one’s “business partner,” then the person one shares one’s life with is one’s “life partner.” “Lover,” though still current, seems to be waning in popularity; I realized how odd it sounded to me when a guest at our wedding introduced her “lover” to the other guests – everyone else seemed to have partners or husbands/wives. “Girlfriend” and “boyfriend” remain popular, despite the teenybopper image. Just “friend” is too ambiguous to be a real contender, as is just using the person’s name. “SO” is popular on the Internet – it’s short and easy to type – but confusing when spoken aloud, and “significant other” is about as lovely as “parental unit.” “Husband” and “wife” get the point across loud and clear, although several people said that they felt the usage was too provocative if the people were of the same gender.

Finally, there is “spouse.” It’s a humble word, but it has an illustrious past, deriving from the Greek word meaning “to pour a libation,” by way of the Latin for “to promise.” It fulfills all the requirements for the position: it’s short, easy to pronounce, gender-neutral, and unambiguous in intent.

So on behalf of Lady Etiquette, I now pronounce you spouse and spouse.

RULE 3: DO NOT CONFUSE THE PUBLIC WITH THE PRIVATE.

Consent Is Not Optional: Outing and Gossip

Outing – that is, disclosing the details of another person’s private life without their consent – became a national pastime a while back. Soon we were being treated to the “news” that (gasp!) Elton John is queer. Why didn’t anyone tell me sooner?!

[I] decided not to hide myself, because if I don’t hide then I can never be threatened with being outed.
– Shea Woodjoy

Outing is not to be confused with coming out. When people come out, they talk only about themselves; outing is, by definition, talking about someone else. In fact, there’s an old-fashioned word for outing: gossip.

Get Out

Q When is it appropriate to out someone?

A Never. Disclosing sensitive information about another person without their prior express permission – colloquially known as “outing” – is an invasion of that person’s fundamental right to privacy and self-determination. I can think of no social situation in which it would be appropriate.

I think that anyone who has so little to do that they feel obligated to “out” others should be severely disciplined – and not in a fun way. – Micah J. Wolfe

Formerly Known As

Q I was at a party and was introduced to a woman named Samantha. Problem is, I already knew Sam... when she was Samuel. I didn't say anything about our having met before, but I felt awkward. What should I have done?

A There's nothing wrong with maintaining another's privacy; you did the right thing. If you later found yourself alone with Samantha, you could always say, "I think we met many years ago; it's wonderful to see you looking so happy and well." This lets her know that you are aware of her past, but also allows her to avoid the topic if she doesn't want to discuss it further.

Preempting Prattle

Q How do I tell people that I'm not interested in listening to gossip? I don't want to sound like a spoil-sport, but I know from painful experience how destructive gossip can be.

A It is possible – and desirable – to train your friends not to share gossip with you. There are two ways to do this. First, you can look them straight in the eye and say, "Does so-and-so know you're telling me this? Because I wouldn't want him to think I'd talk about him behind his back." Stops them in their tracks every time.

Because I'm poly I once had someone who disliked me tell others that someone other than my husband was the father of my child. I tried to ignore it, but it hurt very much. – Kat

The other method is less accusatory but so disarming that it has exactly the same effect. The next time someone offers to tell you a juicy secret, say, "You know, I'm a terrible gossip. You really shouldn't tell me anything confidential. I'll forget myself and tell everyone." Then change the subject. Ironically, calling yourself a gossip in public is one of the quickest ways to stop being one.

Yes, Sirree!

Q I met a wonderful dominant man online, but I'm not sure how to address him. Should I call him "Sir" all the time, or use his name?

A While “Sir” is certainly a polite usage in mainstream etiquette, in the leather community the honor of using any kind of title is a privilege. Ask him what he prefers: “I’m unsure how to address you. May I call you ‘Sir’, or do you prefer some other form?”

Who’s on First?

Q How do I stop total strangers from calling me by my first name? I’m not an old fogey, but I resent being “Arthured” by faux-cheery salespeople, waiters, and receptionists. Worse yet are the professionals who call me Arthur but expect me to call them Dr. Whosit.

A Old fogey or not, you have endeared yourself to my heart. I agree that it is high time for a return to the dignity of the family name. Being on a first-name basis used to imply a certain level of intimacy; now knowing another’s last name means the same. The trouble lies in how to cajole the rest of the population into humoring us as we usher in a new age of civility.

In business settings, like the ones you name, make a point of introducing yourself with your title (Mr., Dr., etc.) and your family name; do not offer your first name at all. Address others in the same way. If asked for your first name when the other has no good reason to need it, simply say, “I always just go by Mr. Snorglethorpe.” If enough people do this on a regular basis, it will stop being regarded as a charming eccentricity and will start looking like what it is: good manners.

The Trouble with Titles

Q If you need to send an email to two or more hitherto unknown Dom(mes) at the same time discussing a joint presentation at a leather event, is it more polite to follow the title “Master” or “Mistress” with His/Her given name (e.g., Master John, Mistress Sarah) or with His/Her family name (e.g., Master Smith, Mistress Jones), assuming you know it? i used to think the given name was best, but then i encountered some Masters Who clearly preferred their surnames. “Sir, Master, Sir” as the greeting form sounds too formal to use in addressing a colleague on a panel!

A Until instructed to do otherwise, use the standard social title plus last name – Mr. Smith, Ms. Jones, Dr. only if s/he is an M.D. – and sign off with your



If you need to address two or more hitherto unknown Dom(mes) at the same time ... (p. 66)

full name (no title). Since you're doing a joint presentation, you're on par with them until they tell you otherwise, so saying "Master" or "Mistress" might seem presumptuous. Also, in the situation you describe, you're functioning not as leatherpeople *per se*, but as professional speakers, so business etiquette takes precedence over the leather protocols unless you're sure that the others would appreciate your efforts in that direction. In your first letter or email, ask specifically how they like to be addressed and referred to, both for the purpose of the presentation and in general, and adjust accordingly in any further communications.

Remember that "Mister" and its abbreviation derive from Master, just as both Ms. and Mrs. derive from Mistress. They're inherently respectful forms of address. Even the president, no matter what one may think of him personally, is never called anything more – or less – than "Mr. President" (or, one of these days, "Madam President"). In fact, it's so unusual to be addressed by social title plus surname these days that it seems both formal and respectful – but doesn't assume anything. A good tactic, under the circumstances.

In mixed or unknown settings, you'll want to avoid "Master Smith," as it's the standard social form for addressing a young boy. In the scene, saying "Master John" could imply that your relationship is closer than it is. If you must refer to him to a third party in the scene, but don't know the gentleman's own preference, the best option is "Master John Smith," because it specifies whom you're speaking about while making it clear that you don't consider J.S. *your* Master.

Positively Positive

Q When is it appropriate to inform someone of a third party's HIV status?

A HIV status, like other medical information, is a private matter. It is the patient's prerogative – and theirs alone – to share that information with others. The only situation I can imagine in which it would be appropriate to disclose someone else's HIV status is in a medical emergency when the patient is unconscious and therefore unable to inform the hospital staff.

Awareness of the rights – both legal and moral – of patients has grown tremendously in the past decade. I was horrified to read that Sydney Biddle Barrows (better known as the Mayflower Madam) recommends warning one's other guests ahead of time if a person with AIDS is invited to a dinner

party!* What next – a list of who’s taking Viagra™ enclosed with the invitation? Unless you have express permission, don’t ask and don’t tell.

One Small Step for Privacy

Q Several of my friends are in recovery from various addictions and participate in 12-step groups. All are open about their past problems. I know that 12-step groups have a policy of anonymity and people aren’t supposed to name names or identify fellow members in public. Is it all right for me to make reference to my friends’ recovery?

A Only with express permission, and then only in the most neutral terms. “Joe doesn’t drink” is fine; “Joe, who used to get sloppy drunk at our office parties” isn’t. If your friends wish to disclose more about their past histories, they should be the ones to do it. While you’re asking, you may also want to find out how your friends feel about helping out others who are trying to get clean or sober; many 12-step group members kindly give blanket permission to pass their number on to those seeking help with addiction.

The Voice of Experience

Q I’m considering gender transition, and my therapist has suggested that I talk with several TSs about their experiences so I can get a better sense of what I’d be getting myself into. I went to a lecture given by a great transsexual woman who seemed very candid and knowledgeable, but I was too embarrassed to ask her to coffee after her talk. How should I approach people to ask for advice or information about their gender?

A Transsexuals who speak publicly about gender do so not only to educate the general public, but to share their experience with others facing similar challenges. Approach the speaker by saying, “I’m considering transition, and if you’re willing, I’d love to talk with you about your experience. I’m sure you’re very busy, but is there a way I can contact you?” If the person is available for the kind of help you want, they will tell you how to reach them. While not everyone has the time or willingness to talk one-on-one, most will at least be able to recommend a support group.

**Mayflower Manners*, pp. 90-91.

Can I Help You?

Q How does one approach a more experienced top for advice, without it looking like a come-on?

A By being clear from the start about the nature of one's interests. Say, "I'm looking for someone to teach me how to use a single-tail. Your technique is wonderful. Do you ever teach classes or accept private students? My bottom and I could certainly benefit from your expertise."

Johnny. Are You Queer?

Q Some straight people in my social circle are always trying to speculate (and get me to) about a third person's sexual orientation. How should I respond to their questions? Would I need to respond differently if the people doing the questioning were queer?

A No. It's not your place to disclose another's sexual orientation, regardless of who's doing the asking. The next time the subject comes up, put on your most world-weary look and say, "You know, I think the only way we're ever going to resolve this is when Marcia tells us her orientation herself. Until then, we'll just have to wonder. Besides, what does it really matter?" Then change the subject.

Privacy or Paranoia?

Q I have a friend – at least I think she's a friend – who is extremely private. When we first got to know each other, she warned me that she didn't want any information about her private life spread around. I don't like to be

I can't spend my life in fear. It would be a slow death. – Sonya Lorenzo

gossiped about either, and I agreed. A few days ago she called me and said that a piece of "personal information" about her had gotten out, and she'd traced the source back to me. I can't for the life of me think of anything I've said to anyone about her, and certainly nothing personal. I've apologized, but now I'm afraid to even see her – what if I say something inappropriate without realizing it?

A If you value your acquaintance with this person, ask her what specific kinds of information she considers *verboten*. Explain that you respect her privacy,

but you realize that people's ideas about it are different, and what seems private to her obviously doesn't to you. If you find that you can't abide by her rules, then you must withdraw from the friendship.

The Forbidden City: Talking about Your Ex

Q How much information is it okay to give out about an ex-lover? How do you tell the community that someone is inexperienced or unsafe without permanently damaging their reputation – and your own? What if you think the ex is insane and dangerous?

A If you have been the victim of abuse, the appropriate people to tell are the police and your attorney. If the person is unsafe or dishonest about their level of experience, it's their actions that are damaging their reputation, not you. However, as most ex-lovers are not criminal – just undesirable – it is best to be circumspect. When asked about your ex, assume a serious, slightly worried expression, and say, "Well, you know that we didn't part on good terms, so I'm really not the right person to ask. I'm afraid I couldn't speak neutrally about her." This conveys the information that you think your ex is perfectly horrid, without sliding into malicious gossip.

I was treated rather poorly by some after I came forward about being raped by a well-known bandage top.
– Vamp Ire

The Truth Is Out There

Q One of my ex-lovers is still part of my social circle. My problem is that he's completely paranoid, and doesn't want me to say anything about our relationship, ever. He's even gone so far as to demand that I pretend that we never dated. (We lived together for two years in the same city in which we both still live.) I respect his right to privacy, but I think this is ridiculous.

A Privacy is one thing; dishonesty is another. You are under no obligation to lie about your own past to suit someone else. Instead, be mysterious. "Oh, we knew each other once..." spoken in a wistful tone, will get your message across loud and clear.

I've Heard So Much About You!

Q How should one act toward former lovers or play partners of one's current partner?

A Cordially. Be friendly but slightly distant. Remember that the meeting is probably more uncomfortable for the ex than for you: after all, you undoubtedly know more about their foibles than they do about yours.

Previously Owned

Q Several years ago I parted ways with a dominant that I'd been in service to for some time. Since then I have begun a relationship with another Master. When I meet my former Master in public, how should I act? What about if my current Master is there?

A Keep in mind that your behavior reflects not only on yourself, but on your current Master as well. Therefore, for both your sakes, be scrupulously polite, but not familiar. If you are attending your Master in public, your focus should be on him or her alone, and you cannot be faulted for ignoring any other person. However, if the prospect of encountering your former Master at a leather event makes you nervous, you may want to warn your current one in advance and ask for direction about how to act.

My Secret Life

Q When – and how – do you tell someone you're dating that you're transgendered?

A If you have even the slightest romantic or erotic interest in the person, it is generally best to tell them sooner rather than later. The second date is a good time, because the simple fact that you're having one indicates that you both like each other. Much later and you run the risk of seeming deliberately deceptive.

Choose a time when you're both relaxed and having fun, preferably in a quiet but not totally private setting. A good opening runs like this: "You know, Jack, I feel so comfortable with you that I feel I can tell you anything. There's something important about me that I think you should know." Be clear and concise. You don't have to give your entire life history or the

details of your medical treatment, just hit the highlights: that you were born a different gender than the one you are now, that you have been this gender for X number of years, and that you're open to any questions the person might have, now or in the future. There's no need to make apologies for anything or to assume that the person won't want to see you again. Good luck!

The Best Revenge

Q How should one deal with one's spouse's lover when one isn't wild about the lover or the situation?

A If you're unhappy about the situation, please discuss it with your spouse – who is the one in a position to change things and who presumably has some concern for your happiness. Polyamory does not mean “I’m gonna do what I want regardless of your feelings about it.”

Some people assume polyamory means I'll sleep with anyone. They quickly learn they are wrong. – Debi Lyn

That said, the question is what attitude to take with a person whom you dislike but whom you must nevertheless see on occasion. The proper attitude is a cordial one, of course, but to that you can always add an aura of great serenity and personal satisfaction. Nothing drives people mad faster than the belief that someone else is really, truly happy.

No Laughing Matter

Q I recently married a wonderful transwoman in a legal ceremony. I sent an invitation to an old college friend – we used to be quite close – but didn't hear back from her. Many months later, I received the following email: “Well, I guess I missed your wedding. Congratulations, if in fact you are officially married for real. I was at a party last weekend and after a few beers I told some friends of mine that my friend [my name here] just married a woman who used to be a man. My friends were pretty confused by that, so I explained about you and [my wife's name here], and we all had a good laugh about how weird it was.” What do you think of this?

A I think you can safely cross this person off your list of friends. Her cavalier attitude toward both your privacy and your wedding is appalling. Instead of

expressing her joy at your union and her regret for failing to respond to your invitation (already a serious strike against her), she has managed to be both mean-spirited and clueless all at once.

If for some reason you hope to salvage this friendship, you must communicate to her your dismay and pain at her presumption. If an abject apology is not forthcoming immediately, you can safely assume that she is no longer worthy of your friendship.

A Stitch in Time

Q I was recently outed in a social club to which I've belonged for several years. I hadn't come out before because it didn't seem relevant to the circumstances (the club is for quilting enthusiasts). I have already spoken to the person who did the outing, but I'm worried about how this will affect my standing in the club, because as far as I know all of the ladies are heterosexual and some are quite religious.

A Be honest but discreet. Speak privately to one or two of your closest friends in the club, and note that you feel confident that such a lovely group of ladies would never do anything to exclude someone based on something as irrelevant to your common interest as sexual orientation. Affirm how much you value their friendship and appreciate their openness. You just may discover that you're not alone in thinking that sexual orientation is a private matter and should be left out of club business.

Before the outing, my work was considered excellent. Afterwards, I was treated as if I couldn't do anything right and became the office pariah.
- Pat Gambill-Read

Who Elected *Him* Master of the Universe?

Q I'm the slave in a 24/7 Master/slave relationship, and I'm disturbed when people outside our relationship try to tell me how I should behave. I have been told that I'm walking on the wrong side of Master even though that's where he told me to walk. How can I put these people in their place (i.e., not in my relationship!)?

A By simply ignoring them. If pressed on specific issues, simply say, "Master prefers it this way," accompanied by a look that says how self-evident this

fact should be. Resist the urge to dole out snappy comebacks, as these may reflect badly on both you and your Master.

Not Your Stepping Stone

Q Why is it that people in the SM community expect the bottoms to do all the grunt work? Whenever I'm invited to a party, inevitably all the bottoms end up schlepping while the tops sit around. I don't mind helping out, but I'm not a submissive – and even if I were, I wouldn't want to be the dogsbody for people I don't even know.

Men have a tendency to look upon an owned slave in public as public domain, and I fend off many embarrassing and "backwoodsish" type comments/calls. Women tend to sneer, snicker, and ask why I do this to inflate His ego. – Arabel

A While some people really do get emotional satisfaction out of grunt work, it's bad manners to assume you can identify those people based on what you think they do in bed or in the dungeon. It's also not very nice to expect party guests – of whatever persuasion – to do the hosts' work for them. Before accepting the next invitation, ask what time play will start, and plan to arrive 45 minutes to an hour later.

What Fools These Mortals Be

Q What is the proper way to handle this situation?: At a leather bar, while I'm outside having a cigarette, a would-be top comes over to my boy and starts playing with his nipple rings. Boy is stunned into silence for a moment, but then tells him to get lost. Jerk then informs boy that he can't be much fun if he can't even take a little tit play. (Jerk may be drunk; we're not sure.)

[B]ottoms are human beings with boundaries... and they should not be seen as public property or touched without permission! – Joseph W. Bean

A First of all, get as far away from the jerk as possible, particularly if he seems violent. Then, take yourself to the bouncer, if there is one, or the bartender, and complain. If they aren't willing to throw the idiot out on his sorry butt, find another bar.

Lines in the Sand

Q I both work and play in the same altsex community. What is okay for clients to see?

I'm out in all areas of my life. I've been treated no differently by anyone who knows – family, coworkers, friends. – Mistress Sharon

A Very little. While undoubtedly some people have worked out individual exceptions, the helping professions have very clear guidelines which exclude any sexual contact between client and helper. Most professionals agree that “contact” includes seeing one’s therapist or doctor in a sling or flogging his or her lover. If you don’t relish the idea of losing your license and your livelihood, maintain a clear line of demarcation between work and play.

I Don't Think So

Q Is it appropriate to correct an evident misunderstanding about another person’s sexual identity?

I’ve lost several blue collar jobs because I am a lesbian. – Natalie Patrice

A No, as it constitutes outing. It is only appropriate if the person in question has already told you, in no uncertain terms, that they wish to be utterly, completely, totally out to absolutely everyone.

Tell Me about Yourself

Q What does a queer person do when a straight person assumes you’re straight and asks if you’re married? How do you clarify the circumstances with sounding politically strident?

A Say simply, “I’m in a committed relationship” if you are, or “No, I’m dating right now,” if you’re single. If you and your beloved have had a commitment ceremony, you can say instead, “My spouse and I had our commitment ceremony (or holy union or handfasting) two years ago. And you?”

Comment: Your husband must not really love you. Response: He’s not my husband and he really loves her too. – Debbie Notkin

None of Your Beeswax

Q I was at a friend's commitment ceremony reception recently, and the discussion at my table turned to the newlyweds' financial prospects. One guest, an aunt of one of the brides, clearly expected her niece's partner (who is the more butch of the two) to "provide" financially for the two of them. At one point, she turned to me and said, "So how much does Jeanette make as a consultant anyway?" I thought the question was terribly rude. What should I have said?

A "I wouldn't know."

Can You Say "Affinity Politics"? I Knew You Could.

Q My lover and I just received another invitation to a wedding. We are gay men, and as such, we are not allowed to legally marry. We are outraged and hurt that so many of our straight and bi friends are getting married when we can't. I think it was a mistake to invite us; it's rubbing our face in the fact that we don't have the same rights as these people. We're considering openly boycotting the wedding in protest of their insensitivity to our needs.

Parties are not the place for advancing social reforms of any kind. –
Quentin Crisp

A I agree that your friends made a mistake in inviting you to their wedding. People who resent the happiness of others do not deserve to be seen in polite society.

By all means, decline the invitation, but please restrain yourself from making your boycott an issue for the happy couple. They sound like they would be wonderful allies for your cause – unless, of course, you alienate them by making what should be a celebration into a political rally.

CHUDWAH-Be-Gone*

Q How can one be clear when speaking to an adult "girl" that you want that you consider her to be the submissive one?

* CHUDWAH is Netspeak for "Clueless Het Dom Wannabe." Sadly, they come in all genders and orientations.

A Has it occurred to you to ask her whether she considers herself to be submissive? No amount of “domly” posturing will turn an unwilling woman submissive. But it will make you look like an insensitive jerk.

Strangers in the Night

Q How do I deal with a one-night stand when we meet again in a social setting?

A Catch the person’s eye and give him or her a smile and a nod. If a third party introduces the two of you, there’s no need to mention that you’ve met previously – just respond with a warm smile and say, “My pleasure!”

Have We Met?

Q Is it acceptable to acknowledge a sex worker you’ve previously hired when you meet him in a social setting?

A Like therapists and other professionals, sex workers maintain a strict code of confidentiality and expect their clients to do the same. You may certainly smile at the person – as you might with any stranger in a social setting – but do not indicate your professional involvement in any way.

I was hurt socially and emotionally by being outed as a prostitute to the lesbian S/M community before I was ready for that. – Amy Hunter

Sex, Ltd.

Q Could you please say a word about honoring sex workers and our limits? We are subjected to the most amazing lack of consideration by some of our clients.

A Sex workers are professionals who specialize in creating erotic pleasure for their clients. That doesn’t mean that they are willing or able to do anything and everything a client demands. Would you hire a tax attorney, show up late to your appointment, expect her to handle your divorce, your park-

[P]eople seem to assume that sex workers are desperate for money and unhirable in any other field, which is just... untrue. – Jane Duvall

ing tickets, weed your garden and fix your transmission – and then contest the bill? Unfortunately, many clients treat sex workers with as little consideration. “I’m paying, so you have to do whatever I want,” is not only bad reasoning, it’s bad manners. Likewise, no-showing (missing an appointment without calling to cancel), canceling at the last minute, and haggling over money or safer sex are in very bad form. Respect a sex worker’s limits: more often than not, you’ll also be assuring your own safety and confidentiality by doing so.

The Inevitable Question

Q I am a sex worker, but sometimes it’s not appropriate for me to be “out” about my work. How should I handle the inevitable question, “What do you do?”

A There are several possibilities here. You can avoid the question altogether with a noncommittal answer like, “Oh, this and that.” If you work alone,

I hate the first question of small talk – what do you do? After 1.5 years in the sex industry, I still don’t know how to answer.

you are “self-employed”; if you work part-time as a dancer or escort, say that you do “temp work through an agency.” And since “What do you do?” is such an open-ended question, you don’t even have to specify what you do for money. Instead, mention an avocation: perhaps you are a budding novelist or a painter.

Some sex workers use “cover” titles or euphemisms for what they do. Here are a few common ones:

<i>Type of Sex Industry Work</i>	<i>“Straight” Title</i>
Porn Actor	Film Distributor “in the film industry”
Professional Dominant	Image Consultant Drama Coach Personal Trainer
Escort/Call Girl/Boy	On-site Consultant Public Relations
Stripper	Dancer Special Events Coordinator

Masseuse/Masseur	Body-Worker
Phone Sex Operator	Phone Crisis Counselor Answering Service Employee
Pornographer	Writer “about relationships” or “romance” “in the publishing business”

Pass the Smelling Salts

Q How should I handle an introduction when a friend specifically does or does not want his orientation to be mentioned?

A What are people expecting you to say – “This is my friend, the sodomite”?! An introduction should never include information about sexual orientation. If your friend wants to come out to someone he’s just met, that’s his business... and his job.

I prefer not to be asked [about] orientation. If I want someone to know, I tell them. – bella

How Do You Do... It?

Q How do you approach a Master/slave couple in a leather bar about their relationship and how it works?

A You don’t. Would you walk up to a couple of strangers in a cafe and ask about their sex life? If you want to learn about D/s relationships, there are any number of excellent books available to help you learn the ropes. In many cities you’ll find leather clubs and educational groups that sponsor workshops and socials. Avail yourself of these resources rather than prying into the lives of strangers.

It’s Not about You

Q How do I respond to pushy bottoms and subs who think they’ll get what they want if they nag long enough?

A Unfortunately, there are plenty of would-be submissives who missed the part about... submitting. They are so caught up in their own fantasies and desires that they forget that dominants have desires, too – and that they’re generally

not focused on servicing others. The only way to disillusion them is to say, politely, "Thank you, but I'm not interested."

Subs... often think that if they're deferential enough, they'll get rewarded. I would so love to disillusion the lot of them. - Christian

Gold Lane Night

Q Someone recently accused me of being a "star-fucker." Several of my lovers have been well-known in the leather community, but I resent the implication that I was only in those relationships for the notoriety.

A You have every right to be miffed, not only for your own sake, but for your ex-lovers'. The concept of "star-fucking" is just as insulting to the stars, implying as it does an inability to distinguish between genuine affection and mere attention-seeking. While some envious types will always use "star-fucker" as an insult, the best way for lovers of the famous to avoid the label is to be exceedingly modest about current or former flames.

Mark My Words

Q I recently attended a local leather event at which the guest of honor was a well-known writer from another city. He spoke briefly and signed books, but afterwards I tried several times to talk with him, and he blew me off. Did he just have an attitude problem, or did I do something wrong?

A While it's possible that the author was feeling self-important, it's much more likely that he just didn't want to be hounded by fans, no matter how well-meaning and appreciative. Scene stars are not public property, after all. Writers, in particular, are often introverts at heart and get overwhelmed by crowds and noise. (Which is why they've chosen a profession that allows them to be alone most of the time.) But even the most outgoing person needs to withdraw occasionally, and a polite person will take a hint.

Return to Sender

Q If a Master releases his collared submissive, should she give the collar back or can she keep it?

A Unless she has been told otherwise, she should assume that the collar and any other tokens remain the property of the dominant and return them at once.

In Praise of Privacy

There used to be three things a lady never discussed: her age, her weight, and her husband's income. Gentlemen refused to discuss politics and religion at the dinner table. Even small children knew that bathroom functions were not mentioned except to those few adults who might be expected to have an intimate knowledge of their diapers.

How quickly we forget! In etiquette, there are two realms, public and private, and many modern etiquette quandaries result from confusing the two. Public discourse conforms to certain rules: you may picket but not obstruct the entrance to a building. You may hand out literature but not verbally harass people. You may publicize your views at Speakers Corners, Town Halls, and on the relevant Usenet groups; you may not wax profane or hateful while doing so.

Etiquette is not opposed to the personal as political, for the awareness of real, live people suffering injustice is exactly what leads to liberation. What makes Lady Etiquette cringe is the political as personal – and worse yet, the ultra-personal as public entertainment. (Lady Etiquette frowns upon the likes of Jerry Springer.) “Express Yourself” is a fine sentiment for a pop song, but it doesn't get you far in polite society. Lady Etiquette instructs us that the easiest way to avoid having our business spread around to strangers is to keep it to ourselves in the first place. If you want to “do your own thing,” for heaven's sake, do it alone. Trust me, the rest of us don't want to watch.

Of course, what passes your lips in the company of your nearest and dearest is none of Lady Etiquette's business, but she would be most grateful never again to hear the following topics discussed within her earshot:

What No Polite Person Discusses in Public

- ⌘ How much you paid for it (particularly if “it” is part of your anatomy)
- ⌘ Your exercise routine, dietary regimen, or medical diagnoses

- ⌘ Your income (or anyone else's)
- ⌘ The food in front of you, unless you're debating whether to have the waiter take it back to the kitchen
- ⌘ What you did in bed with anyone, including yourself
- ⌘ What you happen to know someone else did in bed, or with whom
- ⌘ The sex appeal of anyone who is not your date
- ⌘ The physical flaws of anyone present or absent (you should, however, quietly alert people to the flora in their teeth, the forgotten buttons or zipper on their trousers, and the toilet paper trailing from their heel.)

TMI: Too Much Information

Q How do I discourage someone from divulging embarrassing information about themselves to me?

A Until we can convert the nation to the cult of personal privacy, the best you can do is try to head off bad boundaries at the pass. There are several options. First, if the information is proffered in the middle of another conversation, you can act as if you didn't hear it. Respond by shifting the topic back to its original subject.

You: I always meet someone interesting at these Monster Truck Rallies, don't you? *Ze:* Oh, yeah! I met Barbara here last month. Boy, was I glad I had my strap-on with me that day! I always carry it with me here in my bag, just in case. *You:* Ah. How long have you been coming to the rallies yourself?

If you are forced to deal directly with an inappropriate statement, keep your response short and noncommittal. Change the subject as quickly as possible without being obvious.

Ze: I was terribly abused as a child, and I can't experience orgasm as a result. *You:* I'm sorry to hear that. (pause) Say, there's Terry. Have you met her? She's a wonderful cook; she brought the burdock-lentil loaf tonight. Come on, I'll introduce you.

If all else fails, say, "I don't think you should be telling me this." Then suggest a more appropriate topic for discussion.

Get a Room!

Q What's a polite, effective way to inform someone that you do not wish to be exposed to their sexual activity in a public place, without either sounding like a big old prude, or sounding condescending? At big events like Pride parades or the Folsom Street Fair, I often see things that are really over the top on this score.

A PDAs – public displays of affection – are a perennial problem at large public events. People are often so relieved to be in a “safe” public space, that they forget the basic distinction between public and private. Hand-holding and social kissing (on the cheek) are acceptable virtually anywhere. If it's a matter of heavy petting, try to move away; I won't criticize you if you do some audible clucking as you do so. Genital sex and nudity in public are illegal everywhere, and can be reported to the authorities. You may also say, “Excuse me!” loud enough to get their attention. Then give them a stern look. They may think you're being prudish, but isn't that a lot better than what they're doing?

Life Is Not Therapy: A Special Case for Privacy

Q One of my dear friends is currently seeing a therapist to resolve some issues around her childhood. Apparently she was abused by a parent and is only now recovering the memories in detail. She is very distraught, as you can imagine. The problem is that she talks about nothing but her therapy process. She even will “regress” to a childlike stammer at the drop of a hat, and has taken to carrying around a battered stuffed animal in her briefcase, “for her inner child.” I have a great deal of sympathy for her, but to be honest, her behavior is embarrassing. How can I get her to grow up, at least in public?

A What used to be an occupational hazard faced by hairdressers and bartenders is now a national etiquette emergency. People are spilling their guts right and left, and we're left to clean up the mess. Inner traumas are very real; but so are the feelings of the people around you. Clearly your friend, in her anguish, has forgotten this.

Her actions call for your compassion, but not your collusion. Whenever she starts to go into that sing-songy Inner Child voice in public, guide the

conversation to neutral but clearly adult subjects: city planning, for example, or local library funding. Remain cheerful, but don't allow yourself to be dragged into someone else's psychological depths against your will. If need be, distance yourself until your friend's therapy has progressed to a point where she can once again be the charming adult you once knew. By that time, she will undoubtedly feel rather embarrassed by her own behavior and will appreciate your attempts to help her maintain her dignity during her healing.

Son of Life Is Not Therapy

Q For a brief time I dated another leatherman, a bottom who was exploring his sadistic side. I am a very heavy masochist, and I get most of my satisfaction not from genital sex, but from flogging. After one very intense scene, the top asked me if I wanted to get fucked. I declined, as politely as I could. (We'd spoken about this before, and I thought he understood that after a beating I'm fragile and don't necessarily want sex.)

Shortly after this scene, the top told me that he no longer wanted to play with me. Later I heard that he was telling others in the community that I had "bad boundaries" because all I really wanted was to get fucked, but I couldn't admit it and "didn't know my own limits"!

A It sounds to me as though you know them quite well. You only need to expand them to exclude playing with people who misuse concepts they learned in their brief stints in therapy.

The idea of "bad boundaries" comes from the therapeutic literature on codependency, a destructive pattern observed in relationships between addicts and their loved ones. Having bad boundaries means having an insufficient sense of where one's own affairs end and another person's begin. If anyone exhibited them in the situation you describe, it was the top. People who insist they know your own needs and motivations better than you do are suffering from a severe case of inflated self-importance (a.k.a. Top's disease). I can only caution you to avoid such people like the plague they are, and assure you that not all tops are as insecure as the one you had the misfortune to encounter.

Sister-in-Law of Life Is Not Therapy

Q Is it possible to argue politely? My partner says that we should be completely honest with each other when we fight, even if it hurts, but I don't always want to hear all the awful things she thinks about me. Is there some middle ground between silence and name-calling?

A Yes. It's called the "I-statement." We'll get back to that in a minute.

But first I'd like to take a moment to look at where your partner got the idea that "radical honesty" – generally interpreted as spilling all the ugly contents of one's subconscious undiluted into one's partner's lap – is the goal of an intimate relationship. Sadly, she seems to have mistaken you for her therapist.

Freud may have been dead wrong about little matters like female sexuality, but he was right when he said that civilization grew out of the repression of our instinctive impulses. Among the many excellent reasons that professional ethics forbid therapists from socializing with their clients is the fact that the no-emotional-holds-barred nature of the therapeutic relationship stands outside the socially accepted models for friendship. No one expects a friend to be quite that honest. The reason we need therapy in the first place is that there are some things that simply can't be said under other circumstances without causing some serious rents in the social fabric. If you apply the standards of the couch to other relationships, you'll quickly find yourself alone.

Now, there are some important skills that therapy can and does teach: how to assess one's own feelings and explain them to others, for example. This is achieved through the "I-statement," and it's the key to the polite experience of arguing that you're searching for. Simply put, I-statements require us to speak only about our own feelings, not those of others. Compare:

"I hate it when you yell at me. You're such a bully!" (Name-calling)

"When you yell at me, I feel angry and defensive." (I-statement)

In the Platonic Ideal of an argument, Partner A will make an I-statement. Partner B will then "mirror" that statement – rephrase it in his/her own words to verify that s/he's understood it – and then respond with another I-statement. This process will be repeated until some resolution is reached. Note that an I-statement is not just a vicious one with "I think" put in front

of it: “I think you’re a damn fool” is no better than its less wordy counterpart.

Obviously, arguments conducted this way work best when people are calm enough to think rationally and have had a chance to assess their own feelings. This effectively means that the heat of the moment is rarely the best time to try to resolve a conflict.

This may all sound terribly rarefied and Californian – and it is by no means a painless solution – but it is the only way Lady Etiquette has found to maintain decorum and actually resolve conflict at the same time.

Recovering from Therapy-Speak

I am afraid that your humble servant must put his foot down on the subject of language. We have all apparently been brainwashed by alien transmissions that induce us to use vocabulary generally reserved for self-help books.

The disturbing result is that otherwise perfectly articulate people suddenly “have issues around their stuff” – whatever that means. To hinder this frontal assault on the English language, here are a few reminders of the mother tongue’s forgotten glories:

<i>Therapy-Speak</i>	<i>English Translation</i>
“has issues”	is upset by dislikes disapproves of is confused by is troubled by
“around” (as in “has issues around”)	with concerning regarding about
“I need you to”	please
“my stuff”	my past mistakes confusion flaws

Click here to see my deviated septum!*

Q I have a friend who is a terrible hypochondriac. He is in and out of doctors' offices and emergency rooms several times a week, takes enough pills to kill a horse, and talks about nothing but his "illnesses." Is it impolite to ignore his histrionics? Is it a breach of confidence to warn others not to panic when he goes off to the hospital in the middle of a party?

A Etiquette asks us to make allowances for others – but allowances are not excuses. When faced with a sudden attack of bubonic plague at your dinner party, the best you can do is usher your ailing friend into a cab and assure your other guests that he will be fine. As host, it is your job to make sure that the conversation doesn't dwell on unpleasant topics, including others' health troubles, mental or otherwise.

* *Seen on the Internet. I could make something like this up??!*

RULE 4: CONSIDER OTHERS BEFORE YOU SPEAK OR ACT.

If You Can't Say Something Nice...

Your mother had a few things right. Very few people are interested in the (generally uninformed) opinions of others, and altsexers are no exception. The amount of offensive verbiage generated by people who open their mouths only to insert their feet is truly astonishing. Unfortunately, at least as much toe-chomping occurs within and between altsex communities as it does outside them. To rectify this sorry state of affairs, I offer the three principles of considerate, polite speech.

Basic Principles of Consideration I: The Subtle Hint

[W]ant of attention, which is really want of thought, is either folly or madness. - Lord Chesterfield

Most modern crimes against etiquette can be traced to a single, pernicious source: not paying attention. In fact, people are always trying to tell us the truth about themselves; we're just not listening.

Hearing Between the Lines: What People Don't Say

Q When I asked a friend how his boyfriend was doing, he answered, "Oh, Martin is great!" Last time I checked, his boyfriend's name was Steve.

A And your friend has a message for you: he has a new lover.

No Quarter

Q I am in an awful mess. A friend of mine, who used to be quite stout, had shed a great deal of weight. I assumed he was dieting, and asked him what his secret was. He didn't seem to want to talk about it, but I kept pressing him. Finally he blurted out, "I have AIDS, all right!" I feel terrible. What can I do to make this better?

A I assume leaving the country isn't a option? At least your story may help others avoid a similar mistake. For you've hit upon one reason that etiquette warns against making people's weight or other aspects of their appearance a topic of conversation. What may look like an improvement to you may signal a tragedy for another. The best you can do is offer your most abject apologies – which you have already done, haven't you? – but under the circumstances I make no promises that they'll be accepted.

Who. Me?

Q I am a novice leatherperson who hangs out with many older, more experienced leatherfolk. They often seem so world-weary and scornful of the scene. How can I let them know that I'm one of "those" novices?

A Try some gentle humor: "Now, Master Bill, you must remember a time when all this seemed new and exciting to you. What happened the first time you ever went to a leather bar?" In the course of telling their stories, your friends may recover from their *ennui*.

Basic Principles of Consideration II: The Polite Fiction

My dear friend Alfred tells a wonderful story about polite fictions. He was teaching in Japan, and had occasion to drive with several Japanese to another city. En route, one of the men said he'd like to stop for a cup of coffee. Passing a roadside stand, Alfred suggested they stop for the drink. The gentleman refused, and

they drove on. Again, he mentioned coffee, and again refused to stop at a stand. Finally, they came to a restaurant. The gentleman sprinted in – to the bathroom.

Now few Americans would hesitate to tell a coworker if they needed to make this kind of pitstop, but there are plenty of other things that our sensibilities prevent us from sharing in unadulterated form. The polite fiction helps us convey important information without banging it over the other person's head.

"But," I can already hear the masses muttering, "why should I have to lie? What's wrong with telling it like it is?"

Plenty. It's virtually impossible to be both radically honest and polite at the same time. To be sure, in close personal relationships, a high level of honesty is the key to greater intimacy, and there should be no reason to lie to your nears and dears. Everywhere else, though, it's neither helpful nor polite to express every thought or feeling that comes into your head. Before you speak, ask "*Qui bono?* Who would benefit from this statement?" If you are the only one to gain, keep it to yourself.

Etiquette views compassion for others as a higher moral value than radical honesty. A friend wrote to me with a (not uncommon) dilemma. She had been invited to a party, but her partner was not. She felt that the hosts were deliberately slighting them because they're queer. Should she confront them?

I suggested that she decline the invitation, saying that she and her partner had previous plans. This polite fiction conveys several pieces of information to the hosts: first, that the person will not attend; second, that she has a partner (a fact of which they may have simply been unaware); and third, that their relationship is serious enough for them to be considered a couple for social purposes. Sensitive hosts would either extend the invitation to the partner immediately or at the next event; bigots wouldn't invite either of them. In either case, the friend is able to assess their intentions without confrontation.

Will some people still choose radical honesty in all cases? Probably. But don't expect to see them at the next social gathering you attend: Radical honesty may be a personal virtue, but used without regard for context, it is not a social one.

Basic Principles of Consideration III: The Benefit of the Doubt

As this last example showed, it's a good idea to give others the benefit of the doubt. This means, simply, refusing to believe the worst until it's proven that

that's indeed what you're facing. Instead of assuming that her hosts were deliberately excluding her partner, this woman might have assumed that they just didn't know she was in a serious relationship.

Responding politely to a rude situation has two benefits. First, it has the advantage of making you instantly appear superior to the offender and any witnesses. Second, it can diffuse tension, or even the threat of violence. Quentin Crisp describes an incident in which he was brutally beaten by homophobic thugs on a city street. He truly believed that they intended to kill him. Yet he remained polite to the end – and the sheer ridiculousness of this pose so unnerved his attackers that they let him live.

By expressing the benefit of the doubt, you can respond politely to almost any affront. And you may well find that, in fact, no offense was intended in the first place.

Back Talk, or Two Wrongs Make a Fight

Your humble servant is seeing far too much of the following forms of bad behavior for anyone's comfort, least of all his:

- ⌘ snappy comebacks
- ⌘ verbal “bashing back”
- ⌘ name-calling
- ⌘ vulgarity

Answering rudeness with rudeness is both unnecessary and unhelpful. Note that refusing to enter into a useless argument is not the same thing as turning the other cheek or acting like a martyr. It is taking the high ground by modeling appropriate adult behavior – emotional show and tell for grownups, if you will.

Sadly, we have very few positive models of civility in action these days, even in the altsex world. Take, for example, a letter to the editor in a recent issue of a national lesbian sex magazine. A reader wrote to complain that there were no “real pretty women” in the magazine, and also railed against a photo shoot in a previous issue that she described as “nasty old dykes looking like dirty old men on Viagra fucking their granddaughters on Christmas Day.” (The shoot featured two women, one 30, the other 50+.) The editor responded by calling this assessment “ageist, butch-phobic bullshit.”

Now, now. What's truly nasty here is not the photo shoot – which, like all pornography, is a matter of taste – but the sense of entitlement that both parties

feel in slamming each other. To be sure, the reader could benefit from some serious lessons in diversity (and the proper use of adverbs), but the editor displayed more political correctness than professional courtesy. This kind of sniping simply won't do.

Fighting fire with fire only results in double the number of burn victims. There is a better way. Read on, dear friends, read on.

Handling the Well-Intentioned but Woefully Misinformed

This much is obvious: Despite our best efforts at consideration and polite speech, we will still on occasion be faced with appalling behavior. Most of these faux pas are the result not of mean-spiritedness, but of simple ignorance and lack of attention. For the purposes of this discussion, we will call these unwitting offenders by their vernacular name, the Clueless.

[T]he majority of people in this culture treat me like a circus side show.
- TerraFire

There are several subspecies of Clueless, and the general principles explained above will help you deal with all of them. Still, differing levels of intimacy will indicate different approaches to cleaning up etiquette messes.

Adventures with the Clueless I: Family and Friends

Whether you're faced with an ignorant uncle, a touchy granny, or a paranoid parent, you're more likely to take seriously intimate questions from friends and family than from strangers – as well you should. There's more at stake here than with total strangers, and communication breakdowns are more often the result of unspoken assumptions and personal history than simple misunderstandings.

Digging Deep

Q A few years ago I had a very disturbing discussion with my father. I had come out to him as a lesbian, and among a number of other horrifyingly prejudiced things, he said that I should watch out so that I didn't "catch the AIDS." I was so upset that I haven't spoken to him since.

My sister marched in gay pride with me, and we were on TV together. - Mollie Driscoll

A When talking to family members, particularly parents, it's important to separate the medium from the message. The mother who snatches her child away from the stove and then yells at him is expressing love, fear, anger, and relief all at once. Likewise, your father, despite his ham-fisted approach, was expressing his concern for your well-being. Yes, he could have done it more gracefully, and yes, he desperately needs to educate himself about both homosexuality and STDs, but his underlying impulse was sincere and loving.

When faced with statements like his, it's best to address that well-intentioned impulse first, and then educate: "Dad, I know you're just concerned for my safety, but did you know that lesbians actually have the lowest incidence of AIDS of any group? Besides, I intend to play safe. I hope you do too."

Different underlying messages call for different responses. With practice, you'll be able to hear what your well-meaning relatives are really saying.

<i>What They Said</i>	<i>Underlying Message</i>	<i>Called-For Response</i>
"What if he won't untie you when you say to?"	"I care about you."	Assure the person of your well-being and offer to educate them about specifics.
"What if you get AIDS?"		
"You'll never get a real job if you won't put on a skirt and some makeup."		

“How do you know these people aren’t dangerous?” “Are you sure this isn’t just a phase?”	“I want to increase my intimacy with you.”	Tell them, gently and simply, about your life. Don’t be afraid of humor.
“You’re going to regret this.” “God will punish you for this.”	“I’m angry.”	Take a timeout. The person may get over their anger, but until then, they’re not ready to hear what you have to say.

Odd One Out

Q What do you do when you are invited to a “traditional” family event, but your partner isn’t – even though the straight siblings had their partners invited?

A Speak privately to the host and, giving him or her the benefit of the doubt, explain that you expect your partner to be included in family events:

“Margo, I’m sure you didn’t mean to hurt my feelings, but it upset me that Chester wasn’t invited to our family’s Thanksgiving dinner. He is my partner, just like Sally’s boyfriend is hers, and I would like to see him welcomed like anyone else.”

If the host is relatively uninformed or outright prejudiced against alternative sexualities, you may have to dispel some ugly stereotypes during this conversation. In the process, you may make the sad discovery that your family simply will not accept your partner. If an apology and an invitation for your partner are not forthcoming, you will be forced to say: “I’m sorry to see that you can’t accept us. Since that’s the case, I’m afraid I won’t be able to attend the dinner.”

While some families would rather ostracize a blood relation than welcome a new person into their circle, remember that “family” isn’t limited to blood. You have the option of throwing your own party with chosen family. Make

I went from Goodie Two Shoes of my family to Black Sheep... it was kind of a nice change. – Dev

it a point to invite single people and seniors, who are often left without a place to go, especially during the winter holidays.

The Art of Successful Coming-Out

Q Are there any really effective ways to come out to a family member?

My mother told me that no matter what, she still loves me. – Valia Derekin

A One of the survey respondents, Stef, has developed a wonderful coming out technique: tell the person beforehand how you want them to respond. “I’m telling you this because I feel that lying to you is unfair, but I want to know that you still love me and that you won’t disown me.” Flattery never hurts, either: “I know you’re much too openminded a person to be bothered by this, but I really want to get it off my chest.”

Do You Read Me?

Q Several months ago I tracked down an old friend whom I hadn’t seen in over ten years and sent him a coming-out letter. I think he suspected all along that I was gay, and since he’s very liberal, I expected him to be accepting. I haven’t heard from him, and while he’s a very busy guy, I’m hurt. Is it OK to send him another note?

A lot of people have reacted to my being queer by just not reacting – it’s such a nonissue for them that they don’t even feel the need to say “Some of my best friends are...” – Anne

A Drop him a short note asking if he received your previous letter and expressing your hopes that he will contact you. If you can, give your phone number or email address. (Sadly for us all, personal letters are going the way of the dodo bird.) If you don’t hear from him after the second note, let the matter rest.

Not the Preferred Term

Q My gay son got angry at me for talking about his sexual preference. Why?



How do I deal with well-meaning would-be matchmakers? (p. 98)

A He may have been offended by the term “sexual preference,” which implies that people’s attractions, like hairstyles or political parties, are a matter of choice. The current accepted term is “sexual orientation.”

Matchmaker, Matchmaker

Q How do I deal with well-meaning would-be matchmakers? My straight friends always want to introduce me to their “other gay friends” without considering what our respective tastes may be. They seem to think that because we’re both gay, we’ll automatically like each other.

A Since formal dances went out of style, the traditional way for people to introduce eligible singles to each other is the dinner party. A selection of engaging people, partnered and not, should be invited and the table set to encourage conversation between the appropriate parties. The rest is up to the guests.

Blind dates, on the other hand, are stressful for everyone involved. Make any excuse possible, but don’t let yourself be set up for a blind date, particularly by people who aren’t aware of your taste.

However, not everyone needs a yenta. If you want your friends to cut it out, tell them that you appreciate their efforts to find you a mate, but you’re doing fine on your own.

What annoys me most is when my homosexual friends call me straight when I’m dating a guy, but cheer me on when I’m with a girl, like relationships and sexuality are some kind of contest. – Cathy Carter

Adventures with the Clueless II: Intrusive Strangers and Nosy Acquaintances

This is by far the largest category – alas.

Why Not?

Q When they learn I’m polyamorous, people often ask why. I never know what to say.

I get more clueless feedback on the issue of polyamory than about any other. – siobhan

A It is an odd question, if you think about it – what sort of answer can they be expecting? Honest answers like “Because I fell in love with two people” or “Because it best meets my emotional needs and those of my lovers” just don’t seem juicy enough. But they’ll have to do. The only other alternative, if you feel obligated to answer at all, is to turn the question around: “Why are you monogamous?”

So Don't Look

I think that what was hardest for me was coming to terms with the ageist body culture of fags, designer clothes, and designer peccs. – Christopher Johnston

Q I volunteer at a local leather street fair every year. This year, a week after the fair, some guys wrote in to the local gay paper to complain about the “eyesores” at the fair: “fat dykes who don’t take care of themselves and then inflict the results on us.” Now I

am one of those fat dykes; but I am also in excellent health. I do “take care of myself.” Where did they get off?

A Somewhere before the brains were distributed at the factory. Since they have taken this issue into the realm of public discourse by writing a letter to the paper, you have every right to respond in kind. Brava!

No Comment

Q How should I deal with being asked about my orientation when I don’t want to disclose it, as at work?

A Memorize the following sentence and apply it as necessary: “I make it a policy not to discuss my private life at work.” You should also be aware that, in some states, employers are forbidden by law to ask about an employee’s sexual orientation or relationship status.

Comment: How do you have sex?
Response: Very well. – Spencer Bergstedt

“Have You?”

Q How do I respond to someone who says, “So, have you had the penis sewed on yet?”

A With a cold stare and silence.

Biology 101

Q I'm out as an FTM, and people often ask my wife and me how we got our kid, or more specifically how she became pregnant. This often happens in public settings where others may not know about me. How can I tell these people to mind their own business?

Just because some of us go on talk shows doesn't mean we all want to share every aspect of our lives. – Kory Martin-Damon

A Your response will depend on what they're actually asking. Do they want to know if you are capable of impregnating your wife – which indicates a basic lack of information – or do they want to know the specifics of how one finds a donor? One way to find out, while shutting up idiots, is to ask, "Oh, are you trying to get pregnant?" (This is particularly effective when the questioner is a man.) In no case, however, are you under any obligation to answer their questions.

And the Rest of Me Is Pretty Too!

Q I'm a supersize woman, and at least once a day someone tries to tell me about their fabulous new diet plan, exercise routine, etc. How do I politely tell people that I'm not interested in losing weight, "getting in shape," or otherwise changing my appearance?

A Treat strangers to a look of distaste and a simple brush-off, like "I'm not interested, thank you." Friends should be told, gently, that while you understand that they are trying to express concern for your well-being, you're happy as you are and would therefore prefer that they not mention the subject again. (If you like a humorous approach, get a copy Marilyn Wann's brilliant book, *FAT!SO?*, and the zine of the same name, for some sassy yet polite comebacks.)

Don't Flatter Yourself

Q I'm a bi man. When I say this, het men either seem to clam up or make stupid "Well, I'd better not bend over around you" jokes. How should I respond?

As much as I hate it, being known as the "guy living with two bi chicks" does get owe points from straight white males [...]. – Adam Wade



How do I politely tell people that I'm not interested in losing weight? (p. 100)

A With a raised eyebrow and a change of subject. You may also get better results if you deliver the news in the midst of some other statement that requires a more thoughtful response from your listeners. “As a bi man, I get frustrated with people who seem to think we’re all promiscuous. But then, people have lots of stereotypes about men in general, don’t you think?”

Here. Let Me Show You

Q I have a number of facial piercings, and strangers are forever asking me “Did it hurt?” What should I say to these people to get them to mind their own business?

A “Why, were you thinking of getting one?”

Why Wouldn't I Be?

Q The other day my girlfriend and I ran into a gay friend we hadn’t seen in a while. In the course of the conversation I asked, “So, are you still with Marcus?” Later my girlfriend said that the question was rude. What gives?

A The way your question was worded implies that gay men’s relationships aren’t built to last. (The fact is that few relationships of any sort last these days, but be that as it may... .) A better question, if you have a good reason to suspect that the two may have parted ways, is “What have you been up to?” This will allow your friend to bring you up to speed, including relationships, on his own terms.

Adventures with the Clueless III: People Who Should Know Better

Sad to say, it’s not just mainstream folks who occasionally suffer from foot-in-mouth disease.



I have a number of facial piercings... (p. 102)

Expanding Horizons

Q How can I tactfully respond to those friends “in the scene” who invite me and my husband to gatherings, but not our live-in paramour, leaving her feeling excluded?

A The first time it happens, resort to a polite fiction. “Oh, Mark and I would love to come, but we’ve already promised our paramour, Jeanette, that we’d spend the day with her.” This conveys key information about your relationship that the host/ess may have missed or forgotten and should elicit a response like, “Oh, please bring her along!” If it doesn’t, you’ve refused the invitation – so go spend the day with your lovers.

If you sense that you need to do some educating, bring up the subject in an abstract way with the host/ess at a later time. “I was talking with Jeanette – our paramour – and she’s very discouraged because people don’t seem to acknowledge her as part of our family. We try to let people know about us, but I’m afraid people aren’t getting the message, even in the scene. What would you do in our situation?” More often than not, the person simply wasn’t aware of your level of commitment or has never thought about the logistics of a polyamorous arrangement.

I... found that a surprising number of people who accepted that my former girlfriend and I had an open relationship still assumed once I met my boyfriend (now my fiancé) I would be monogamous. – Rivka

Manly, Yes...

Q Would you please comment on the stereotypes that some lesbians have about FTMs? I’m referring specifically to statements like the following:

- FTMs are just queers suffering from internalized homophobia.
- TS men just want the societal privileges of being men.
- Testosterone turns FTMs into violent, macho pigs.

Unfortunately, I lost almost all of my “friends” who identified as lesbians or dykes when I transitioned. Women who identified as butches were the most virulent in their attacks... can we say “gender issues”? – Riley Morgan

A This kind of nonsense is bad politics, bad biology, and bad manners, and you are fully within Lady Etiquette's graces if you simply ignore it. If you really want to try to counter these stereotypes on a one-to-one basis, consider asking this deceptively simple question: "What makes you say that?" Listen carefully to the responses, and any time you detect an unexamined prejudice, simply repeat the question. Invariably, if you can keep your cool while the other person sputters and fumes, they will arrive at a point of utter confusion – which also leaves them open to education. It worked for Socrates, and it can work for you.

Something Fishy

Q I recently attended a mixed "spiritual" gathering with a woman. (I am a gay man, as were most of the other festival attendees.) Clothing was optional on the land, but when my female friend removed her shirt, a small group of men nearby (who were wearing translucent Indian skirts and no underwear, mind) made a number of rude "fish" comments within her hearing. She was good-natured about it, but I thought this was way out of line. How should we have handled it?

Comment: You're just like one of the guys. Response: Huh?

A Your friend handled the immediate affront well; no one need acknowledge crass comments. I'm sure the irony of skirt-wearing men exhibiting misogynist behavior wasn't lost on anyone – except the offending few. Since the gathering was advertised as "mixed" and clothing optional, you should inform the festival organizer of the incident and ask for support. Perhaps an announcement around the next campfire is in order?

Blind Spot

Q Our marriage is completely monogamous. We don't even do nonsexual SM play with anybody else. Yet, the scene being the way it is, we run with a very poly crowd. We have no problems with polyamory, we just don't want to participate. How does one politely let people know that while their friendship and companionship are welcome, we don't want to play with them or anyone else?

I have felt that there is a lot of pressure throughout the community for me to give up my ideas about attaining monogamy for myself. – Curt Freitag

A By simply repeating “Thanks, but no thanks” until they get the message. You might say something like, “We’re very flattered, of course, but since we’re monogamous, we’ll have to bow out.”

Stuck in the Middle

Q How should bisexuals respond to the biphobic comments we’re subjected to from both gays and straights? Gay people act like bisexuality is “just a phase” (where have we heard that before?) and straights seem to think that we’re “really just gay.”

A You would think that other queers, at least, would understand the idea that sexual orientation is more complicated than just “Insert Tab A into Slot B.” Since some people apparently have a great investment in binary notions of gender and orientation, jokes and snappy comebacks won’t even make a dent in their ideology. Education and visibility, while not as satisfying or fun, are the only way to get the message across. Try asking “Why do you say that?” to figure out what particular stereotype or misconception you’re facing, and educate from there.

Why is it that no one questions people when they are gay or lesbian, but [you] are automatically attacked when [you] identify as bisexual? – Miss Carry IS Justice

Adventures with the Clueless IV: The Just Plain Stupid

Call me a curmudgeon, but there are some etiquette blunders for which there are just no excuses. They call for desperate measures.

There’s a Reason Cats Have Nine Lives

Q I’ve tried to use the old advice about how to respond to people who pry – asking “Why do you want to know?” Invariably, people say, “Oh, I was just curious.” How clueless can people get?

A Trust me, it's far worse than you ever imagined possible. There is, however, a very simple response to the "curiosity" argument, and it works every time:

One thing I value greatly is the willingness of people to ask what seem to be "stupid" questions. This gives me the opportunity to clear up ignorance, to participate in a dialogue.
- Libby Heck

Dweeb: Oh, I was just curious about how you can have sex without a penis.

You: Oh. (silence)

Since "I was just curious" is a statement of fact, not a question in itself, it requires no response. Eventually they will figure out that you're not going to indulge their prurient interests and will leave you alone. It may take a while, though, so you can

make a game of seeing how long it takes people to catch on. My current record is 1 minute and 28 seconds.

One date told me (while we were dancing) that I was very light on my feet for someone of my size. I told her that I was smart for a girl too.

And You Don't Get Any

Q How should one respond to rude comments like "You're really hot for a fat guy"?

A With stunned silence and a quick dash for the nearest exit.

What Part of No Don't You Understand?

Q I was recently propositioned by a person whom I dated long ago, before I

came out of the closet. He knows that I am not interested in people of his gender anymore, but that didn't seem to stop him from pursuing me. In the process of refusing him, I mentioned the fact that I am transgendered. The would-be suitor

I just smile at the ignorant.

came back with "I don't care about your being trans; I'm bi!" I was dumbstruck.

A Apparently you need to use very short words with this person. Try "Go away." Repeat as necessary.

Mind-Boggling. Indeed!

Q What does one say when asked if tonight's mind-boggling sex was better than mind-boggling sex with a previous partner?

A "Get out of my bed and never come back."

Oh. The sex was *that* mind-boggling. Sorry. How about, "How could I even think about someone else at a moment like this?" (The implication being, of course, how could he.)

Beyond Scary

Q I have had several people ask "How did you get it?" when I informed them of my HIV+ status. Helllooooo! And this is from gay men!

A Pardon me, but I must go revive Lady Etiquette, who appears to have fallen down in a dead faint.

Her Ladyship and I are doing our best to prevent such dunderheadedness, but for now, you'll just have to apply a steady gaze and a deep sigh until they do the math. Be patient. Clearly these people are running on the intellectual equivalent of fumes.

Handling Unrepentant Bigots and Other Ne'er-Do-Wells

A society in which 'anything goes' is one in which nothing goes well.
- Quentin Crisp

You may have noticed that, up 'til now, I've suggested very little by way of outright displays of anger. That's because I consider them extreme measures to be used only after all other polite possibilities have failed. In nine cases out of ten, the principle of the benefit of the doubt saves us from the hyper-defensive posture that so many altsexers adopt these days. The truth is, most people don't intend to offend.

And then there are the bigots. Yes, Virginia, even I have to admit that they exist. I've even met a few. While they are terribly unpleasant, it is still possible – in

fact, necessary – to deal with them politely. Etiquette has a definite method for handling them: censure.

If polite people are rewarded for their good behavior by enjoying full and satisfying social lives, bigots must face the (mannerly) wrath of that same society for their wrong-doing. In a culture with an agreed-upon set of manners – one, in other words, utterly unlike our own – bigots and other offensive characters soon find themselves without friends, without work, and without hope. (Today, they are just as likely to get multi-million dollar book deals and their own talk show.)

How does censure work? First and foremost, it proceeds slowly, allowing the offender at any point to recognize the error of his or her ways and make amends. It most definitely does not jump directly to the lawsuit, which makes the courts do the work of a lazy society.

Censure consists of a strictly ranked set of actions that signal to the offender and to any witnesses that offense has been taken. In order of stringency, these steps are:

- 1) The Look (and its verbal equivalents)
- 2) Outrage
- 3) The Cut
- 4) The Police (formerly, the duel; now also commonly, the attorney)

Lady Etiquette's Big Book of Looks

Clueless vanilla men occasionally make a point of "playfully" physically overpowering me when they learn I am a dominant. I go limp and then give them what I hope is a withering look. – Catherine A. Liszt

The hidden messages in crossed arms and balled fists are common knowledge. Now it's time for the facial expressions that convey more than words.

The Withering Look: eyes half-lidded, chin slightly lowered, nostrils flared as if you were smelling something unsavory, like ignorance. A single raised eyebrow may be substituted.

The Cold Stare: back very straight, eyes more open than in the Withering Look, with an utterly blank expression and immobile features. Stare until the other person looks away. This is related to That Look, which was the one your mother used to give you when you did something unspeakable at the dinner table in front of guests.

The Horrified Look: draw upper body back, open eyes wide, and take a sharp breath in. Think "Well, I never!"

WITHERING



THE COLD STARE



HORROR



Disgust.



The Look of Disgust: like the Horrified Look, but with the face and upper body slightly turned, as if away from the source of the disgust. Instead of the in-breath, substitute a slight huff of air.

Conversation-Stoppers

Sometimes it's necessary to accompany a Look with words for emphasis.

To end the conversation, accompany your Withering Look with one word: "Really." Note that your voice should not rise at the end of "Really." It's not a question, but a statement that the topic of discussion is inappropriate. Pause for a heartbeat, then change the subject.*

There are several alternative conversation-stoppers. Rev up your Look and then choose from the following menu:

- 1) "Indeed."
- 2) "I see."
- 3) "Oh." (Or the Wodehousian version, "Ah.")
- 4) "Is that so."
- 5) Deafening silence.

If all else fails, opt for the francophile "*Parlons d'autre chose*" – Let's talk about something else.

Outrageous!

When the offender ignores the Look or refuses to respond to hints that a topic is off-limits, one may be forced to express outrage. This is done both verbally and physically.

Adopt a very rigid, upright posture, if seated; if standing, take a deep breath in and draw yourself up to your full height. Then say one of the following:

- ⌘ "What are you saying!" (Again, this is not a question.)
- ⌘ "I can't believe I'm hearing this!"
- ⌘ or the classic: "How dare you!"

An expression of outrage sends a clear signal that you are offended and angry. It is your final warning shot before you ask to see someone's supervisor or leave the room. If you don't see some back-pedaling pretty darn fast, state your

* I tip my hat to Miss Manners for her explanation of this technique and her acide analysis of the niceties of the full stop.

terms ("I won't stand for this. I expect you to apologize immediately for this insult to my partner's honor!") or leave the situation entirely ("I refuse to sit here and listen to this. I'm leaving!").

Persona Non Grata: The Cut

This is the last step in cases of bad behavior that are not technically criminal, but nevertheless so reprehensible that to stand by as a witness to it without taking action would itself be a breach of both etiquette and common decency. To cut someone means simply to refuse to acknowledge their existence in public or in private. It's ignoring taken to the nth degree. When a whole social circle does it, it's called ostracism.

It works like this: Say you are walking down the street with a friend and see an unrepentant cad approaching. When you are in close range, look directly at the person with an utterly impassive expression on your face. Make eye contact for a heartbeat and then keep walking. Don't nod, don't speak, don't even cough. In order for the cut to be effective, the person must know beyond the shadow of a doubt that you have seen them, know who they are, and are refusing to acknowledge them anyway. What's worse, the offender knows that anyone with you will have noticed the silent exchange and will probably ask, "Who was that?" A polite person responds... "Nobody."

The cut, when properly performed, is devastating, but in order for it to retain its power, it must be administered sparingly. In all of my wide circle of acquaintances, I can only think of one person I would (and have) cut. Save it for the most rotten apples, lest they spoil the barrel.

911: Calling in the Guard

If it's a matter of life, limb, or property, one should proceed to this step immediately. Felonious acts are by definition rude. Call whatever authorities are in order, and do it quickly.

One in Every Family

Q I was at a family dinner recently, when my uncle made a truly horrifying racist comment. Now I knew his political views were different from mine, but this was far beyond the realm of reasonable difference. I was so

Why should I be grateful for what should be a basic human right? -
Jaime Arundel

shocked that I said nothing, and neither did anyone else, although we traded some looks. Afterward I felt terrible for letting him get away with this kind of thing – what should I have done?

A Contrary to what some people think, etiquette does not ask us to stand by when people say and do unacceptable things. Etiquette had very clear guidelines for dealing with hate speech long before campus codes and the ACLU. Etiquette doesn't tell you what to think, but it does dictate when, where, and how you can express those opinions, and people who disregard the rules get (socially) punished by the community. In short, there are times when "making a scene" is exactly what you should do. You just have to do it politely.

Here's how it works:

Uncle: "Those damn blah-blah-blahs. They're all yadda yadda!"

You sit up very straight and hold your napkin in front of you with both hands as if you were about to rise from the table, and say, "Now, Uncle, I'm sure you didn't mean that the way it sounded!" This sentence should be said firmly and should be accompanied by a look coupling outrage and expectation, rather like the look that teachers give students who really should know the right answer by now. This is your warning shot. Your words and posture show unmistakably that you've taken offense and that the offender has exactly three seconds to figure out how to respond.

At this point, the offending person will do one of two things: either they'll (a) backpedal as quickly as they can, or (b) say something even more offensive.

In case (a), you slacken your rigid posture somewhat and return your napkin to your lap, making it clear that you don't intend to leave after all, give a weak smile, and say, "Yes, of course they're not," or some other mild, noncommittal rejoinder. Then you change the subject. Resist the urge to engage in debate or lecture the person about why and how they were wrong; both are rude.

In case (b), you get up and leave the table. Yes, you read that right. You may say a quick word to your host or hostess on the way out, but you are not obligated to break bread with bigots. In fact, etiquette (and common decency, which are closely related) demand that polite people censure those who overstep the bounds of polite speech.

Will this cause hysteria in your family? Possibly. Some people may try to tell you to humor your uncle; ignore them. Listen to the people who will

come out of the woodwork to tell you that they wish they'd had the nerve to stand up to him a long time ago – one of whom may well be your aunt.

If He's an Example of the Species...

I've been told that women can't enjoy sex without a penis being involved. I politely told the gentleman that he had a rich fantasy life. – Dev

Q How should one deal with het men who harass lesbians?

A As little as possible. If the harassment takes place in public (cat calls, vulgar name-calling), ignore it. Not reacting deflates the ego of the harasser. If it's in a business setting, state clearly that the behavior is unprofessional and report it to the person's supervisor immediately.

Not Negotiable

Comment: When I think about what you do, I just can't stand it. Response: Fantasize about something else. – The Reverend Patricia Ross

Q What should I say to someone I've just met who expresses disgust at my sexuality?

A In his delightful book *Manners from Heaven*, Quentin Crisp shares the perfect response. He writes:

“When the very centre of your being – in my case, ambiguous gender – becomes a subject of scorn, there isn't much choice about how to respond to the world: either you say, ‘I'm awfully sorry, I see how wrong it is, I will not be homosexual from now onward,’ or else you have to say, ‘I cannot be otherwise, this is the way I am, if you can't bear it then we must never meet again.’”

Takes One to Know One

Comment: You're a monster/sadist/rapist. Response: What I do is consensual; what you are doing to me is not. – John Warren (Mentor)

Q Is it worth confronting obvious closet cases who are just projecting their self-hatred onto out queers?

A Rarely. People who are busy repressing some truth about themselves don't take kindly to having their efforts demolished by mere mortals. Remember Cassandra's fate, and hold your peace.

The Fear of God

Q How should you handle religious fundamentalists who just want to berate or convert you?

A With asbestos mittens. Your humble servant really does have hope for everyone, but fundamentalists (religious, political, or otherwise) try his patience sorely. The only polite way to handle them is to follow the standard format: give them the benefit of the doubt, but if necessary, apply censure. In practice, this usually means walking away.

I don't get involved with people who want to have religious arguments about my life. – Mark Moody

Is the Toaster Deal Still On?

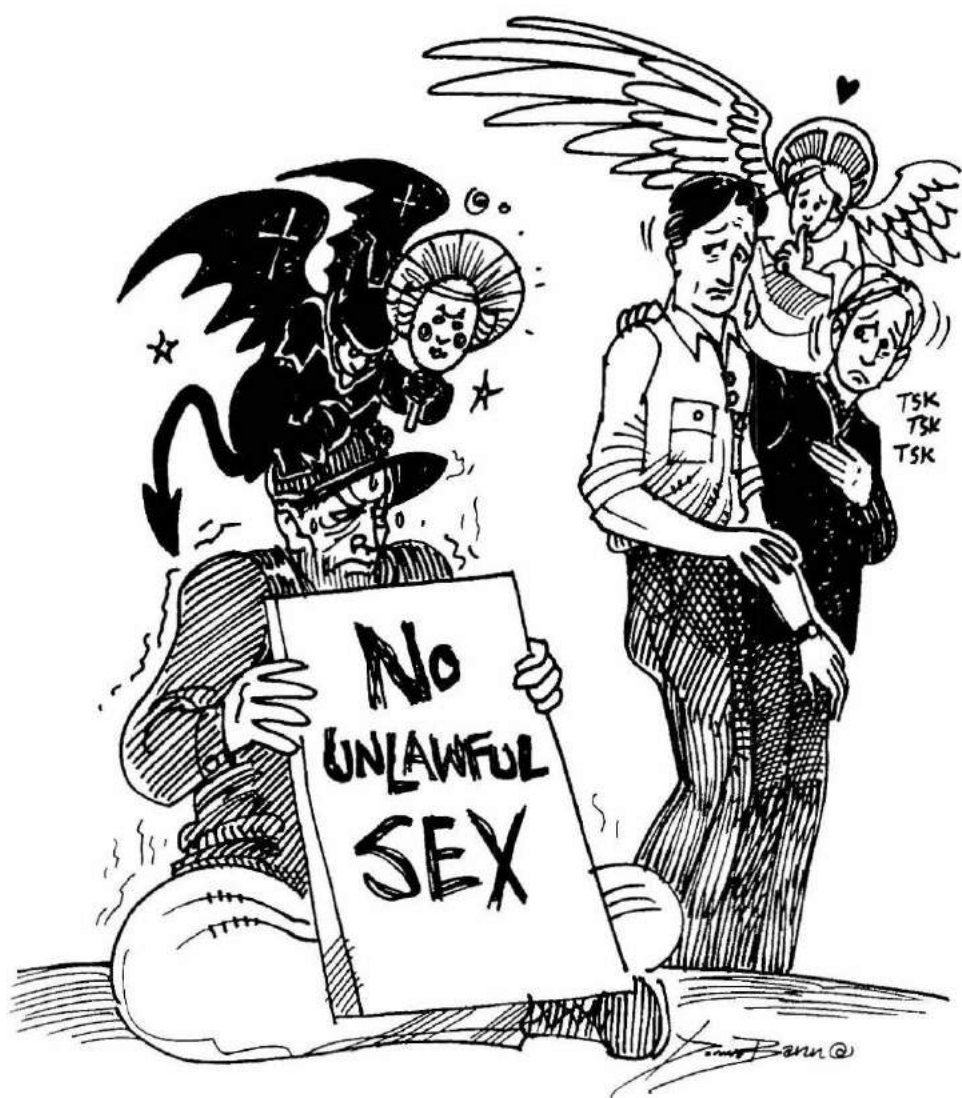
Q What should you do when someone is afraid to let you spend time with their children because being around you “might make them turn out gay”?

A Your response will depend on the “reasoning” involved and how close you are to the family in question. If the parent is at all open, you might point out that most gay people had heterosexual parents – so environment clearly isn't the defining factor in sexual orientation. If the person appears to be an all-out bigot, drop the issue – but support queer youth organizations, so that if their kids turn out to be gay, they'll have someplace to go to escape their parents.

Damage Control

Q How does one confront a queer abuser and battle silence about same-sex abuse?

A Abuse is a legal issue, not an etiquette one. Ideally, queer abusers, like other abusers, will be locked up with the rest of society's criminals. The way to insure that is for victims and their allies to speak openly – preferably in front of a judge – about what's going on. Sadly, this happens far less frequently than one might hope, but it is the only way to end domestic violence once and for all.



How should you handle fundamentalists who just want to berate or convert you? (p. 115)

The relevant etiquette question, then, is not “How does one confront an abuser,” but “How does one treat an unrepentant one who is still walking around?” The answer is very simple: one shuns that person.

Some people did not believe i was raped because i was into “that kind of thing,” i. e., bdsm. – The Nymph

Snidely Whiplash & Co.

Q Is there any way to inform a friend of an impending romantic disaster – say you’re aware that a partner or potential partner is lying to said friend, or has duplicitous motives in starting/continuing the relationship – without either sounding Cassandrine or simply coming off as a nebbish with her nose in everyone else’s business?

A Once upon a time, there were gentlemen and there were cads. Now we all know that gentlemen come in many genders – and unfortunately, so do cads.

If the cad in question has done something criminal – like stealing from a former partner or abusing that person – the proper response is to take that information to the local police station or social work office. The only other way to handle impending doom is to contrive for your friend to meet one or more former partners of the cad – preferably those with fewer compunctions than you have about speaking openly.

Blurts

Blurts are a special category of rude comment that “just seem to slip out.” They are usually grounded in a basic misconception about alternative sexualities, and they can be very offensive. Depending on the circumstances, you may want to educate the person, ignore the comment altogether, or, in extreme cases, apply censure.

“Everybody Knows...”

Q How do I deal with clueless and offensive statements about leathersex like, “Only weirdos do things like that!” or the assumption that all SMers were abused as children?

A One effective method is to ask, “Why do you say that?” and listen carefully. After the person has rattled on for a while, spewing stereotypes, ask, “Do you have any actual experience with the leather community? Where did you learn all this?” Again, listen. When the person has sputtered out, do a little basic education, sprinkling your speech with key words like “consent” and “safewords” and “negotiation.” If asked where you get your knowledge, just say, “Think of me as the voice of experience.”

Comment: Oooh! You’re into Leather? You like to beat people up and get beaten up? Response: Is this the voice of experience? – Luke Owens

Highly Selective

Q How can I explain to people that being a polyamorous sex worker doesn’t mean that I’m promiscuous?

A The quickest way is to make it clear that you’re not interested in having sex with *them* – which is usually the underlying assumption.

Sorry, kids, but just because I do sex work for part of my living doesn’t mean it’s open season on my poor tired carcass.

Perfectly Capable

Q I am disabled, and people sometimes think that I invited a third person into my marriage to “service” my wife sexually, since they assume I can’t. How can I lay these stupid stereotypes to rest?

A A confused look followed by resounding laughter would do the trick. You can also engage the assistance of your wife and your lover. All they need to do is say cheerfully, “Oh, no, that’s hardly the case.”

I was asked if I’ve ever had “real sex,” meaning sex with a man. I responded, “Yes, I’ve had lots of real sex. I’ve also had sex with a few men, but the real sex was better.” – Hunygrrrrl

That's Not Funny!: Jokes We Don't Want to Hear Ever Again

There's a buffoon in every crowd. Unfortunately, very little modern humor is mannerly. When faced with an offensive joke, how should one react?

First, if you sense a rude joke coming on, interrupt the teller by adopting a Withering Look (see p. 109) and saying, "I don't think I want to hear this." If the

At work I had to deal with another well-educated guy in the office who made jokes about gerbils. This was humiliating. – James M. Sharp

person continues anyway, get up and leave the room. If you can't leave the room, say, "Perhaps you didn't know that I am (or "my partner," or "my mother-in-law is") X." This statement appears on the surface to be a "benefit of the doubt" clause, but also manages to convey outrage. And for all you would-be comedians, here's a list of jokes we could do without.

- ✂ Ethnic jokes (including WASP jokes)
- ✂ Men jokes
- ✂ Blonde jokes
- ✂ Fat jokes
- ✂ Religious jokes (including "Jewish mother" jokes)
- ✂ Anything involving gerbils, vacuum hoses, or other things that show how little you know about how we have sex

People We Love: Altsex Allies

Q How can I let a transgendered person know that I'm an ally?

A If you do nothing else, treat them with the courtesy and consideration you would extend any other person. This is the greatest vote of confidence you can offer to any altsex person.

Role Model

Q How can I help gay teens without being mistaken for a pedophile?

A Contact a national network, like P-FLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, an education, support and advocacy group), to find out what resources for queer youth already exist in your area, and support those organizations with your donations and by volunteering. You may want to sign up to be part of a speakers bureau, and make presentations to local schools and community groups about being queer. When statistics show that fully one-third of teen suicides are queer, it is more important than ever for altsex youth to have positive role models.

If you work with teens professionally, as a teacher or clergyperson, for example, keep pamphlets and a list of contact numbers around for teens who may come to you for advice. If you work in one of these fields, it's important to keep good professional boundaries. Be willing to say, "As your teacher, it wouldn't be appropriate for me to socialize with you, but I'll be happy to put you in touch with a local support group."

When my mother was told that we were living in a poly situation in our home, there was a pause and then she said jauntily, "Well, tell everyone I said hi!" [...] I love her to pieces for it. — Kim Attica

Beyond Black and White

Q What's the preferred term for a person of African descent within the queer community?

A Same as outside: the going term right now is "African-American," although many people are happy with "black." When in doubt, ask.

A Friend Indeed

Q What can I do to support my fat friends in their struggle for acceptance?

A First of all, please accept my thanks for your care and concern. As Monica Lewinsky wryly noted, it's all right to be anything in America... except fat. Here are a few things that all people, fat and not, can do to support fat people's self-acceptance:

I was compared to a pedophile because I am poly. I calmly explained that polyamory is between consenting adults, and that while I'm sorry he was having trouble with this concept, he could either be polite or go away.

- ⌘ Don't be afraid of the word "fat." It's an adjective, not a curse.
- ⌘ Don't assume all fat people want to lose weight.
- ⌘ Accept your own weight, whatever it is.
- ⌘ Tell your fat friends that you love them, period – not "even though" they're fat.
- ⌘ Join NAAFA, the National Association for the Advancement of Fat Acceptance.
- ⌘ Treat fat kids with respect.
- ⌘ Challenge stereotypes about fat people at every turn (including your own and those of your fat friends).
- ⌘ Ask the fat people in your life what you can do to make them more comfortable.

Mazel tov!

My best friend said, "I think it's wonderful! I want to throw you a coming out party!" – Tippy McCarthy

Q What should you say to someone who's just come out to you?

A "Thank you." And, if they have announced a change in gender or a new relationship, "Congratulations."

Ooh, Baby, Baby

Q Lots of my queer friends are having children. What's an appropriate "tell me more about your lovely new baby" question that isn't "boy or girl"?

A Here's a selection: How old is your baby? Oh, look, s/he's [fill in activity: smiling, drooling...] – how adorable! They learn so much at this age. What's s/he doing that's new? Or you can just exclaim: S/he's so sweet!

Avoid any gruesome stories about childhood illnesses, your own abuse issues, or how difficult it is to be a parent these days – especially if you're not one yourself.

If you want to be extra-special-nice to new parents, offer to babysit so they can go out to dinner, shop, or just grab an afternoon nap.

Once and Future Family

Q Is it appropriate to stay in touch with the family of my deceased partner? I'm in a new relationship.

A If the family is willing, absolutely. Your new partner will undoubtedly take it for what it is: a sign of your loyal and caring nature.

My mom has become a big gay advocate at her church. Now she knows all the gay people in Monterey. - C J Handy



Lots of my queer friends are having children... (p. 121)

RULE 5: PLAY NICE OR GET OUT OF THE SANDBOX.

Whether it's the more private arena of dating, or the A-gay wedding of the year, social events are a testing ground for modern manners. The guidelines here are straightforward: either play by the accepted rules of a given event, or stay home.

Private Parties: Dating

If there's one social situation fraught with more anxiety than any other, it's the Date. Here are the basic rules, which are applicable to all genders and orientations:

- ⌘ If you want to invite someone on a date, call and suggest a specific day, time, and activity. "Let's get together some time" is not an invitation. (More often, it's interpreted as a blow-off.)
- ⌘ The person who invites, pays. Repeat: The person who invites, pays.
- ⌘ If you want to suggest splitting the bill, do so upon acceptance of the date; don't haggle at the table.
- ⌘ If you want to see the person again, say: "I had a wonderful time, and I'd love to see you again soon. Here's my number; please feel free to call me."
- ⌘ There are two possible responses to the above: (a) "Thank you. How about I give you a call around the middle of next week?" or (b) "Thank you." The former means you should expect a call between Tuesday and Thursday; the latter means "I don't want to see you again."
- ⌘ If you say you'll call, do so. If you don't intend to, don't say you will. (This is one polite fiction that just doesn't work.)

- ⌘ Do not ask if you may call unless someone has already offered that privilege.
- ⌘ If you place two calls and they go unanswered, the person is blowing you off. Yes, it's very rude; it's also very common. Do not continue to call, lest you appear to be a total nebbish.

Strangers in the Night

Q How does one treat a one-night stand? Do I offer breakfast and a shower? Must we exchange numbers? How can I politely ask him/her to leave so I can get on with my day?

A A one-night stand is still a guest, so it's polite to offer a shower (and a clean towel, please) and at very least a cup of something caffeinated. Breakfast is a nice touch, but not strictly necessary, especially if you don't usually eat it yourself. To get a lingering guest to leave, you often have to go out yourself. Get your coat and say, "I've got to run down to the corner for a quart of milk/newspaper/pack of cigarettes; I'll walk you to the bus/your car if you like."

Exchanging phone numbers is optional. To offer, write yours on a piece of paper or hand over your card and say, "I'd love to get together with you again sometime. Please give me a call." There's no need to reciprocate if you're on the receiving end of an offer like this, by the way, nor should you promise to call if you have no intentions of doing so. A smile and "thank you" is enough.

Enough Is Enough

Q How do I establish properly that "it was fun, but it was a one-night stand"?

A It should be assumed that if two (or more) people meet for the first time and then have sex in the same 24-hour period, they've engaged in a one-night stand. People who are looking for more ought not to go to bed with someone they've just met.

Unfortunately, a few desperate souls want to ignore these realities. If you don't want to continue a *liaison*, resort to a clear but polite fiction. Say, in an apologetic tone of voice, "I had a great time with you last Saturday, but I really have a lot on my plate right now. I hope you understand." They will.



...half-way through the appetizer, he got a call on his cell phone (p. 127)

Next?

Q Is it tacky to cruise others while on a date?

A Yes.

Mouthing Off

Q Last night I was out to dinner with the man of my dreams – or so I thought – when half-way through the appetizer, he got a call on his cell phone. He proceeded to chat all the way through the entree, only getting off the phone to order dessert. Aside from some eye-rolling and a few pained looks, he did nothing to end what sounded, from our end, like a social call with a few requisite mentions of business matters thrown in for good measure. (He is not a physician, social worker, or TV producer.) After he hung up, he said simply, “Some people never know when to shut up.”

A Indeed. Your dinner partner, apparently, is one of them.

Happily for us all, many restaurants and theaters are instating “no cell phone/pager” rules, despite the fact that no rules more binding than etiquette’s should be needed to show people that engaging in phone conversations in the presence of a guest – particularly at the dinner table – is the height of rudeness.

If you ever intend to dine with this person again, you should be sure to mention beforehand that you’d like to schedule your dinner for a time when he is not “on call.” If he balks at this request, you may have discovered that he is not the man of your dreams, but your worst nightmare.

Bless You!

Q How do I entertain someone with every allergy under the sun?

A Let him/her choose a restaurant, then pay. If that’s impossible, choose a mutually agreeable activity that doesn’t involve food.

Yes, No, Maybe So: the Polite Proposition

Q How do you ask out a poly group or suggest that you would like to join in the fun, individually or all at once?

A Extending an invitation to play, whether with an individual or a group, follows the same basic format as any date. Call or send a note saying, "I'd really like to play with you. Please give me a call if you're interested." (Sending a note or leaving a voicemail message gives the receiving party/ies the chance to think about it before responding – a polite touch.)

As with any date, there are a few proper responses. Either (a) call to make a coffee date to discuss plans or (b) call to say "Thank you but... ." After the "but" insert one of the polite fictions or other explanation: "I have a lot on my plate at the moment"; "I'm taking a rest from play"; "we're monogamous." If you'd welcome interest later, say: "I'm pretty busy at the moment, but when my life calms down, I'd like to talk with you. May I call you (in a few months, when school lets out, when we're done moving...)?"

Open for Business

Q How do I let someone know that just because I'm attached doesn't mean I'm not available?

A If you're at the flirting stage and unsure of someone's intentions toward you, you can slip the relevant details of your relationships into the conversation: "Yes, Bill and I are a great team. It was wonderful for me to find someone who is as committed to polyamory as I am, and we share a lot of political interests as well." At a play party, it's perfectly acceptable just to say, "I'm available to play, if you'd like."

I Think I Hear My Mother Calling: the Polite Brush-Off

Q How do you turn someone down who's asked you to go to bed with them?

A Gently. Say, "I'm very flattered, but I'm really not up for it. Thanks anyway." If you'd be willing to reconsider at another time, say, "Tonight's not good for me, but I'd really love a rain check!" Then let the person know how to get in touch with you.

Dr. Freud. I Presume?

Q Is it true that smoking a pipe in public is a code for someone wanting to have oral sex?

Comment: When did you figure out you were gay? Response: About the same time you realized you were straight. – Dave Murdock

A Sometimes a pipe is just a pipe.

When the Nasty Gets Nasty

Q How should one deal with shit during anal sex?

A Most people who enjoy anal sex are quite matter-of-fact about shit, so you don't really need to worry about shocking your partners. To minimize the problem, get in the habit of taking a quick enema and a shower before sex, or at least visit the bathroom and try to empty your bowels the old-fashioned way. (A half-cup of coffee helps.) Keep a stack of clean handtowels (a.k.a. trick towels) by the bed, or use unscented baby wipes to clean up any messes.

Fin

Q Why is it that gay men always end relationships by not returning phone calls? Is this method of ending relationships universally understood in the gay community?

A It may be understood, but it's also rude. The polite way to end a relationship is with a brief, in-person meeting, preferably in a neutral public place, at which you say, "I don't think we should see each other anymore." What comes before that statement depends a great deal on your reasons for breaking off the liaison – anger, boredom, better prospects – but it should be kept to a minimum. Be honest, but not brutal. "I need someone who is financially stable and interested in raising a family" is one thing; "You're a slob and a miserable lay, and did I mention I hate your dog?" is another. A phone call is only an acceptable substitute when distance makes a face-to-face meeting impossible.

Broken Chains

Q How does one break off a BDSM relationship?

A In the same way as any other:

✂ state your intent to leave the relationship,

- ✂ clarify any repercussions (how you expect to deal with each other in public, who will tell mutual friends),
- ✂ tie up any loose ends as soon as possible (return borrowed items, including collars or other tokens, clear your stuff out of their house),
- ✂ then leave the other person alone.

The Perfect Guest

Q What's the right way to handle holidays with "in-laws"?

A The key is to be a good guest. Remember these tips:

- ✂ As the old saw goes, "Guests and fish stink after three days." Make your stay brief, or get a hotel room.
- ✂ Bring a small gift with you – food items are nice – and send another afterwards. Accompany the gift with a charming note.
- ✂ Offer to help with household tasks like washing dishes or setting the table.
- ✂ Don't interrupt the household routine.
- ✂ Don't expect your hosts to act as private tour guides or spend every minute with you. Be self-sufficient.
- ✂ Clean up after yourself. (Especially if your partner is one of those people who instantly reverts to the emotional age of 13 upon entering the parental domicile.)
- ✂ Don't overindulge in food or drink.
- ✂ Make friends with the family pet. If you're allergic, bring allergy pills.
- ✂ Find one area of common interest with each member of the family and make a point of discussing it one-on-one. (It's fine to enlist your partner's help on this beforehand, but a quick perusal of the bookcase, trophy shelf, or video library will often do the trick, as will attention to family banter.)
- ✂ Laugh at Dad's jokes.
- ✂ Listen to Grandma's stories as many times as she wants to tell them.
- ✂ Treat your partner like a god/dess.

May I Help You?

Q I will soon be visiting the home of a dominant friend who has a live-in slave. How should I treat the slave?

A Unless you have specifically negotiated to play with the slave, treat him or her just as you would a maid in a hotel. Be polite, but not chatty or overly familiar. Do ask your dominant friend about the slave's limits and do not ask for favors that s/he is not permitted to grant. Remember that the slave is not at your beck and call; s/he undoubtedly has other, regular duties to fulfill.

The world would be a better place if we all had butlers again. – Judith Martin

In general, you can expect that a live-in slave will tidy your room, provide you with towels, extra pillows, or other necessities, and may fetch drinks or snacks for you, just as a hired household or hotel worker would. S/he may unpack your bags, as well, so if you have any personal items you don't want touched, carry them in a handbag, or alert the slave beforehand. Extend all the courtesies to the slave that you would to anyone professional who has assisted you: say please and thank you, and if you feel the slave has gone above and beyond the call of duty, put in a good word with the Owner.

Upslairs. Downslairs

Q What is the correct on-going etiquette in a formal BD house with hierarchy?

A Whatever all the involved parties have agreed upon. The details of such an arrangement should be spelled out in a formal contract, and are by nature far too individual for your humble servant to dictate. For some suggestions and examples of contracts, see *Miss Abernathy's Concise Slave Training Manual* and *Training with Miss Abernathy: A Workbook for Erotic Slaves and Their Owners*.

Party Hearly: The Basics

Everyone loves a party, right? Only when people behave themselves. By issuing and accepting invitations, both guests and hosts agree to play by certain unspoken rules.

Hosts are responsible for...

- ⌘ issuing clear and timely invitations
- ⌘ being ready on time for the guests' arrival
- ⌘ providing food, drinks, the venue itself, and any entertainment
- ⌘ making introductions
- ⌘ directing conversation as necessary

If you accept an invitation, you must follow the rules as laid out in that invitation. These include...

- ⌘ responding in a timely fashion
- ⌘ arriving on time
- ⌘ dressing appropriately
- ⌘ bringing only those who were invited
- ⌘ behaving courteously with the other guests (even the ones you don't like)
- ⌘ participating in the special event (if a wedding, etc.)
- ⌘ eating what's provided
- ⌘ leaving in a timely fashion
- ⌘ sending a handwritten thank-you immediately afterwards

If you can't play by the rules, you must decline the invitation – without detailing why you think the rules shouldn't apply to you.

How to Read an Invitation

A clear invitation should include several elements: who's throwing the party, who's being invited, what kind of a party it is, when and where it will be held, and how to let the host/ess know whether you'll attend. In addition, certain pieces of key information will be conveyed, not in words, but in the form of the invitation itself. A formal, engraved invitation implies a traditional event; a quick note on a memo pad or an email message implies a casual scene. Dress accordingly, and keep your conversation at an appropriate level for the event: jeans, T-shirts, and off-color jokes may be fine for a keg party, but they're unacceptable at a wedding.

In general, one should respond to an invitation by the same medium in which it was issued. Written invitations should be answered in writing; those issued by phone can be answered by phone.

Musical Chairs

Q What is the appropriate dinner party seating for poly and/or queer couples/groups?

A The old rules about boy-girl-boy-girl seating arrangements are no longer in force. Instead, place people together who you think would enjoy each other's company. To facilitate conversation among the group, partners are generally not seated next to each other.

Polyamory is a way of viewing and managing relationships. Swinging is a sexual activity. Neither necessarily includes nor excludes the other.
– Ancilla

More Than You Bargained For

Q Here's the situation: I was having a birthday party at a local restaurant, with cake afterwards at a friend's house. I invited a former play partner, whom I'll call Jamie, to the dinner. She accepted, but asked if she could bring "her Mistress," as they had a play date a week later and this was the only time they could get together to negotiate the scene. I have nothing against the Mistress in question – in fact, I find her quite attractive and have flirted with her in the past – but I didn't relish the idea of the two of them spending the party talking about how they intended to have sex, and I said so. A few days later I got an irate call from the Mistress, asking if I had some quarrel with her. Apparently, Jamie had already invited her to the party before asking me and then "uninvited" her when I expressed my dismay at their plans. (What exactly Jamie told the Mistress, I'm not clear, but she obviously made me sound like a jerk.) I tried to smooth things over, but I am not sure if I was successful. Neither woman has spoken to me since. What could I have done differently?

A You handled this impossible fiasco reasonably well, all things considered, although I trust that you worded things more gently to the women in question than to me. Ideally, when Jamie mentioned wanting to bring an uninvited date – which is very rude – you could have said, "Oh, I'm sorry, but

there's limited room at the dinner. Perhaps the two of you could do your negotiating early in the evening and then join us at Lisa's for cake? I'd love to see you both."

It sounds, unfortunately, like jealousy played at least as big a role in this scenario as manners. Your own interest in the Mistress was surely not lost on Jamie, and perhaps she was hoping both to flaunt her good fortune and to prevent you from stealing her prize. If this was the case, and the Mistress is worth her salt, you may take comfort in the fact that Jamie's Machiavelian ploy could not have escaped her notice.

Not on Your Life

Q Are there any events that it's really bad manners not to attend?

A Only a few, but they're biggies. Severe illness or death (your own) are the only excuse not to go to:

⌘ A local funeral.

⌘ Your partner's graduation ceremony.

⌘ Any party you're throwing.

⌘ Any party thrown by a head of state.

⌘ Any dinner party you've previously agreed to attend.

⌘ Any wedding within the next two weeks that you've previously agreed to attend. (And if you simply don't show up, Lady Etiquette will offer you no quarter.)

Gift Horse

Q What is the etiquette for poly gift-giving? Should a "primary" get a more expensive gift than a "secondary"? I gave a nicer gift to a secondary and the primary got hurt and told a friend that I wasn't respectful of her position in the relationship, even going so far as to imply that I was "anti-poly."

Comment: Oh, I could never do that. It's so complicated! Response: And monogamy is simple? - Jane Hawkins

A Polite people do not notice the cost of a gift, much less comment on it to third parties. If you're dealing with otherwise lovable people who are displaying random fits of rudeness on this count, why not substitute a group activity with you for the more standard wrapped-up-with-ribbons gift? If you feel this requires some explanation – although you certainly don't owe an explanation for your own generosity – perhaps you could say, "What do you say we skip holiday gifts this year and all go do something fun together instead?"

"But little Alistair adores strip poker...!"

Q When is it okay not to invite children to an event?

A The question might better be phrased, "When must one invite children?"

My 11-year-old niece said, "Oh, I've never met one [a lesbian] before. Give me five minutes to get used to it." – Jayne Ashton

There are very few events – another child's birthday party being one example – where children's attendance is assumed. Otherwise, the decision to invite or not invite children lies solely with the hosts and is considered completely neutral in etiquette terms. Obviously children must be excluded from events like sex parties or other strictly adult gatherings.

Three's a Crowd

Q One of my friends is part of a poly triad. Her primary partner is wonderful, but their third lover is, frankly, a jerk. If I invite my friend and her primary to an event, am I obligated to invite the jerky third?

A If they socialize exclusively as a trio and you wish to avoid giving offense, yes. Try to remind yourself that even though you find the lover troublesome, your friends see a lovable side to this person. For their sakes, be cordial.

The Gang's All Here

Q How can one invite a portion of one's social circle to an event and not others, for whatever reason – limited resources/space, appropriateness of members for a certain activity, etc.



Her primary partner is wonderful, but their third lover is a jerk. (p. 135)

A Whom you invite to parties is your business; no one has an inalienable right to an invitation. If you keep up a regular round of socializing, no one will feel left out. Before your next big event, invite your B-list buddies to do something they particularly enjoy. (Don't do so after the event, though, since it will look like a guilt-induced afterthought.) Just don't split up couples or menages when you send out invitations, even if the activity might be a stretch for one partner. Let them decide who wants to attend.

Special Events I: Sex Parties and Clubs

Q What's the difference between a sex party and a sex club? If I go to a sex event, can I just watch?

A Sex parties are private, invitation-only events; sex clubs are businesses open to the public, although some form of membership is usually required (as at a gym). In either case, rules about voyeurism will vary, but guests are always encouraged to join in the fun. If you just want to see "live sex acts" without participating, you'd be better off going to a strip club.

Usually my friends who swing will say, "Well, I'm not into that." Really? Well, exactly why are you spanking your spouse? — Talyn

In most cases, you won't be allowed into the play space in street clothes; fetish gear, lingerie, or nudity are the norms. Also, virtually all clubs and most private parties require guests to have safer sex, and failure to abide by this rule will get you eighty-sixed from the party, as will disrespect for the boundaries of the other guests.

Cruising etiquette also varies with gender. In men's clubs, talking is taboo, but at women's and mixed events, you are expected to ask before touching and you can expect the same courtesy. If you're in doubt about the house rules, check with your host/ess or the door person.

The Gentleman's Club

Q What is the proper etiquette for men's sex clubs?

* A feature of some sex clubs and public restrooms, gloryholes are openings cut in a wall through which a man can offer his genitals for anonymous oral sex.

A Here are a few tips from some gentlemen of my acquaintance:

⌘ Don't hog the gloryholes*.

⌘ If you're interested, touch the guy gently (no grabbing). If he moves away, it's a "no." Don't push.

⌘ Chatting is frowned upon in most clubs; save your socializing for the bar.

⌘ Anonymity is the rule; don't ask for names or offer yours.

⌘ Follow the house rules on alcohol and drug use.

⌘ If safer sex is required, don't try to buck the rules.

⌘ Don't throw attitude; everyone's there for the same thing.

Virtuality≠Reality

Q Can you please explain to people the differences between online SM and real life play? I've noticed that most of the inappropriate behavior at play parties comes from people who've only ever played online.

Comment: I could never... ! Response: Did anyone ask you to?
- Bladerunner of Portland

A As any reader of the Marquis de Sade will have noticed, there are lots of things that bodies can do in print that they can't in the flesh. Some things that one can blithely skip over online – safewords, condoms – are still mandatory in the dungeon. That much, I hope, is clear to all.

In my experience, online-only players aren't really that different from other novices. They all need to be made aware of community norms regarding negotiation, voyeurism, and private property. To wit:

⌘ Get as much information as you can about safe, sane, and consensual BDSM before attending a play party. Books like Jay Wiseman's *SM 101* or Pat Califia's *Sensuous Magic* are great introductions. Take advantage of workshops or lectures in your area.

⌘ Read the waiver carefully and ask immediately if you have any questions or concerns.

- ⌘ Observe any guidelines regarding safer sex, safewords, or other party rules. If you have any questions, approach a DM (dungeon monitor) or the host/ess.
- ⌘ Do not assume that just because a woman is dominant, she wants to dominate *you*.
- ⌘ Ditto men.
- ⌘ Ditto submissives.
- ⌘ Do not assume that all women are interested in people of your gender.
- ⌘ Ditto men.
- ⌘ And everyone else.
- ⌘ Do not touch another person's property (toys or people) without express permission.
- ⌘ Be aware of the "safe space" around a scene; if you want to watch, don't crowd the players.
- ⌘ Don't interrupt a scene except in an emergency.
- ⌘ Learn to observe so that you may observe and learn.

Dressed for Distress I: Fetish Dress Codes

Q How does one handle fetish dress codes when one doesn't have or wear leather, rubber, etc.?

A As an incorrigible preppie, I sympathize with those who consider khakis and polo shirts fetishwear, but to most players, this getup screams "tourist." The goal of dress codes is not just to make your life difficult – and expensive – but to assure that the people at the party are not just looking for cheap thrills. The guests at a dungeon party are there to play, not gawk.

"Fetish" doesn't just mean leather or rubber, though. Lingerie, form-fitting clothes, and your birthday suit are all reasonable and sexy alternatives. At many parties, cross-dressing is encouraged, and this can be done with a minimum of fuss and expense. A slip or a suit jacket from the thrift store and a little hair gel is all you need.



How does one handle fetish dress codes when one doesn't have or wear leather, etc.? (p. 139)

Still, the bottom line is that party hosts reserve the right to dictate how their guests should dress. No one has a “right” to be invited to or attend an event. If you don’t like the rules, don’t go.

That Smarts!

Q Is it okay to tell strangers at a party that they’re playing unsafely?

A Rather than interrupt a scene, tell the DM (dungeon monitor) or the host/ess. Describe exactly what you’ve seen and ask if they’d check the situation out. Sometimes what looks scary from the outside is actually a carefully negotiated and consensual scene. (And sometimes it’s just sloppy and dangerous play.)

Naughty Boys

Q I am a dominant woman who regularly attends leather play parties around the country. At the risk of sounding sexist, I’m going to come out and say that the behavior of some (not all!) male subs is just appalling. I’ve been hounded by men who wouldn’t take no for an answer, and I’ve seen plenty of other women, dominant and submissive, deal with the same thing. Could you please say a word about proper boundaries and respect?

A Unfortunately what you describe are not just isolated events. One longtime party host in San Francisco was forced to exclude single men from his events after a few miscreants systematically harrassed women at the parties. Host/esses make a good faith effort to keep their guest lists free of bad elements, but the larger the party, the harder it is to screen everyone. Occasionally someone sneaks in who missed the part about “consent.”

Responsible party hosts will take immediate action against those who do not observe their rules. If a pushy bottom – or anyone else – won’t leave you alone after you’ve clearly asked him or her to, speak to the DM or host/ess.

Comment: Why? Response: Just lucky, I guess. – Kyla Wazana

Please. Ma’am?

Q What is a polite way to approach someone at a play party?

A First and foremost, remember that SM players are people, not roles: they have relationships, tastes, and normal physical needs like food and sleep. It's easy to think of a hot stranger as "one-who-can-fulfill-my-desires" rather than "real-person-who-deserves-my-courtesy."

⌘ There's no need to adopt an exaggerated role if you want to suggest play; in fact, this can seem presumptuous. Instead, strike up a conversation as you would under other circumstances.

⌘ As a conversation-starter, you might mention having enjoyed watching the person play, or compliment them on their outfit or tattoos.

⌘ If you're interested in a top, speak directly to that person. If you're interested in a bottom who is with another top, approach the top first; if the bottom speaks for him- or herself, you'll be referred to him/her.

⌘ Be specific about what you are interested in: "I'd love to know what a cane feels like. Would you be interested in showing me?"

⌘ If you'd like to get together at another event, or privately, offer your card or phone number. (For privacy's sake, you may want to invest in a voicemail number for just such occasions.)

⌘ If you don't get an immediate response yea or nay, back off.

⌘ Never interrupt a scene to give your card or chat with one of the players.

⌘ Remember that not all players have open relationships or play with all genders. If that information is extended, say thank you, and don't linger.

Not If You Were the Last Person on Earth

Q How should one politely decline a request to play with one's property without revealing that s/he'd rather die than play with the person who is asking?

A Say, "We appreciate the thought, but no thank you." No further explanation is necessary, but if you like, you may insert a polite fiction: "She's not in the mood to play just now," "We're just watching right now," and so on. If you are approached by someone more desirable, but at a bad time, give your voicemail number and directions for when to call ("Give us a ring before the next party and we can chat.").

That's Enough. Thank You

Q How do you tell someone you don't want to play with them again because the play was unsatisfying? And how can you find out why someone doesn't want to play again, if you do?

A BDSM negotiations are an odd phenomenon: here you are telling your deepest, darkest fantasies to someone who may be, on other counts, a perfect stranger. Play, like plain old genital sex, creates a startling intimacy between two people, and it's not uncommon to fear hurting someone's feelings after the fact.

Still, it's best to be direct, though not harsh. If you don't intend to play with the person again, simply say, "I appreciate the time you spent with me, but I don't think our styles of play are compatible." If you think there's room for improvement, you'll need to be more specific. Find one thing you enjoyed about the scene and mention that first: "I really liked the bondage you did on me." If you must criticize a person's technique, stick to I-statements: "I find I need a lot more warm-up, and I'm not really into riding crops."

The only way to find out why someone else doesn't want to play again is to ask directly. You might say, "I know that people's play styles sometimes just don't mesh, but I wanted to be sure that I hadn't done anything unsafe or offensive. Please do tell me if I have."

Special Events II: Parties that Never Should Have Been

It's Not a Broadway Musical

Q What is a "rent" party? Are they a regular part of altsex culture?

A A rent party is nothing more than a small-scale fund-raiser to help someone come up with their rent money. They were common in the early part of the 20th century in close-knit urban communities like Harlem. The host provided a bottle of something strong and some good music, and the guests

threw in a couple of bucks each toward the rent. In a small group where everyone is in pretty much the same financial boat, rent parties could be considered a grassroots form of mutual aid. Next month, you might be the one needing help, and you could count on your friends to come through for you.

No more. No one wants to see a friend out on the street, but the amount you'd have to spend to get people drunk enough to cough up millennial rents would itself go pretty far to keeping your landlord at bay. If it's a one-time problem – and people do occasionally have bad breaks – friends of the person in need should rally 'round and help out quietly. If the problem is chronic, however, it's ultimately more helpful to point the way to the nearest social services office or credit counseling network.

Avon Calling?

Q A coworker of mine invited me to her house for a party. About half way through the evening, the hostess's sister-in-law arrived with a large suitcase, which turned out to contain sex toys for sale. Not only do I not want my coworkers to know what sex toys I own, but I thought this was a cheap trick. I was not informed about the nature of the party beforehand.

A These events, informally called “Fuckerware Parties,” have enjoyed a certain popularity among “liberated” women, but the name is a misnomer. Party guests should not even be asked to buy drinks, never mind dildos. What you attended should be properly called a “sale.” It was indeed both underhanded and unprofessional of your coworker to invite you to such an event. The appropriate response would be to stand up, once the deception had become clear, and say, “Well, Gladys, I’ve had a lovely time chatting, but I really must be going now.”

Not Even Close

Q I was recently invited to a friend's birthday party. He rented out a popular local bar-restaurant. When we arrived at the door, we were informed that people were expected to pay a not inconsiderable amount “to help defray the cost of the food and entertainment (strippers).” I later learned that some people were let in half-price “because they brought a gift,” and some people



Her sister-in-law arrived with a suitcase, which contained sex toys for sale... (p. 144)

worked a shift at the cash bar (sic!) if they couldn't afford to pay to get in. Is this considered acceptable these days?

A It never was, and it still isn't. People who throw parties are responsible for providing the food, drink, entertainment, and venue. If they can't afford a big bash, then the solution is not for them to make their party a for-profit venture, but to scale back their plans to a point that won't put them in the poorhouse. People who pay to enter an establishment aren't guests, they're customers, and what you were invited to is properly called a nightclub. The correct response to such an invitation? Your regrets.

Again. Again!

Q My friends and I are all successful professionals in our middle years. Several of us regularly get together for dinner as a sort of informal supper club. The problem is this: about half of our friends expect these events to be potluck, while the other half, when their turns come, provide a full spread for eight people. Those of us who cook all day as hosts are starting to resent having to turn around and cook again when we're supposed to be guests.

A Potlucks make sense for people whose finances don't allow them to provide full-scale meals for their friends, which is why they're a mainstay of college life. Once people have houses and jobs and steady incomes, it is reasonable to expect them to make the switch to the adult equivalent: the dinner party.

It's time for the members of your club to settle on one style of dining, either potluck or not. You may want to suggest that if dinners are too troublesome, the group switch to a less involved meal, like brunch or tea. Expense may be more of an issue than you're aware, as may the busy schedules of your professional friends. In any case, introduce the topic gently: "Say, maybe we want to rethink how we're doing the dinners. I'm afraid that it's too much trouble for some people to provide a whole meal, and I'm sure none of us wants to impose."

Special Events III: Rites of Passage

Comment: Well, at least you don't have any children problems. Response: Yes, and only four more years of schooling to pay. (sigh and pause) And how many children do you have?
- Joe Krass

The Bundle of Joy

Q Is it appropriate to throw a baby shower for a single, lesbian mother? What about a gay couple who are adopting?

A The answer is a resounding yes in both cases. Baby showers are traditionally thrown by the friends (not the immediate family) of the parent(s)-to-be, in order both to celebrate the prospect of the first baby, and to help provide the parent(s) with the things they'll need to make the baby comfortable: clothes, dishes, bedding, car seats, the works. Ergo, gifts are expected, and you shouldn't be afraid to choose something practical. Bring gifts to the party with you rather than sending them ahead, as you would for a wedding.

The party should be small – usually only close friends are invited – and intimate. Light food, such as sandwiches or pastries, should be provided, along with drinks. (As showers are generally afternoon events, alcohol is not required.) The guests arrive within 15 minutes of the start of the event, eat and mingle for another 15-20 minutes, then settle down to watch the parent(s) open gifts. After all the gifts have been opened, the guests make another round of the buffet table, give the parent(s) their best wishes, and depart. The whole thing should take no more than 90 minutes, start to finish. The guests of honor should send thank you notes as soon as possible after the event; if there are many gifts, a friend may be appointed to take notes on who gave what to make the note-writing easier.

In some communities, I'm told, it's traditional to play little party games, like charades. This is acceptable, as long as the guests of honor agree, and no one is forced to participate. Heavily pregnant guests should not be expected to dance around, pretending to be Shirley Temple.

I outed myself as a commencement speaker at my college graduation.
– Ian Follie

This Is Your Life

Q Are there any “alternative” life cycle events celebrated in altsex communities? How should an outsider acknowledge them?

A More and more altsexers are celebrating the milestones of their lives with parties or rituals. Some examples are coming out anniversaries, transition birthdays (to mark the beginning of life in a new gender), and alternative

forms of traditional events, such as commitment ceremonies (also called “holy unions,” or simply “weddings”) or Pagan baby-naming ceremonies (called “wiccanings” in some traditions).

If invited to an event, by all means go. Gifts are traditional for all of the life cycle events mentioned above, although a heartfelt letter means more than a hastily chosen present. If the event has a religious component, you will not be expected to participate beyond what is comfortable for you. Just stand and sit when others do; and remain silent during any prayers that you don’t wish to say.

The Ultimate Etiquette Challenge: The Wedding

I was Best Person and Matron of Honor at my husband’s commitment ceremony with his otherlove. – Carlo

Here Come the Brides

Q At a same-sex marriage, are there two brides/grooms, or what?

A What. It depends on how the people getting married describe themselves. When in doubt, you can refer to them either as “the happy couple” or “my lucky friends.”

The Dignified Response

Q My lover and I will be celebrating our holy union at our parish church next summer, with a reception to follow in the church garden. We are not youngsters, and will be hosting the event ourselves. What is the correct way to word our invitations? Also, is it necessary to include response cards? My better half says they’re tacky, but I think they’re the only practical way to insure a response from our busy friends.

A Traditional invitations are usually issued by the parents of the couple, but it is more and more common for couples to host their own weddings. A formal invitation would be worded as follows:

Dr. Charles Abercrombie-Wu



Is there special etiquette for femme-butth weddings? (p. 150)

and
Mr. Lawrence Unterhosen
request the honour of your presence
at their holy union
Saturday, the twenty-fourth of July
nineteen hundred and ninety-nine
at half after three o'clock
St. Smithers Church
Boystown, California
and afterward at a reception
in the church garden

(Note that the Anglophilic spelling of "honour" is traditional; you may change it if it offends your sense of patriotism. The text should be centered on the card, with line breaks as shown.)

Preprinted reply cards, although they represent a serious compromise for etiquetteers, are now so commonplace that I'm afraid we'll both just have to sigh and accept them. Do not, however, assume that your friends will actually use them. As the reply-by date comes and goes, you'll be forced to phone the procrastinators.

As You Like It

Q Is there special etiquette for femme-butuh weddings?

A Only that which the couple dictates. Some butches are comfortable being referred to as the "groom," while others would object strongly. You can help people out by referring to yourself in the way that best expresses your intentions.

You May Now Be Sealed

Q I know that at traditional weddings, the bride's family sits on one side of the church and the groom's on the other. How is seating arranged in a ceremony with more than two partners or in other situations where there is no "bride" or "groom"?

A Seating in the round or a semicircle is ideal. In any case, guests of honor (parents, grandparents, children, very close friends) are seated closest to the action. If the venue doesn't allow for this, consider just having open seating. Ushers are a great help here – early birds are seated closer to the front, with late-comers filling in behind.

You Shouldn't Have!

Q We've just received a wedding invitation from a distant cousin of my partner. The last time they saw each other, Nixon was in office, and I've never met her at all. We don't plan to attend the wedding, which is in another state. Do we have to get them a gift?

A No one is ever obligated to give a gift, although there are certainly occasions where they are traditional and welcome. Under the circumstances, a warm letter wishing the happy couple all the best would do nicely.

Sign Here

Q How do gay people properly handle gift registries? Which name(s) should appear on the forms?

A Most stores now ask for the names of the "co-registrants," not the "bride" and "groom," but should you wish to register at a particularly old-fashioned store, just cross out the inapplicable terms and write in "co-registrant." Then list both your names. It's also helpful to mention to a few close friends where you are registered, since your guests may ask them rather than you.

Not Another Blender!

Q My partner and I are getting married soon. We have more material things than we know what to do with. Is it all right to specify "no gifts" on the invitation?

A "No gifts" is a no-no. Couples are supposed to maintain the polite fiction that gifts are a surprise, not an expectation. (And in fact, no one "owes" you a gift.) Rather than try to thwart your guests' generous impulses, why not redirect them? When people ask where you're registered, you can say, "You

know, Albert and I volunteer with the Names Project; we'd be honored if you wanted to make a donation to them." Still, some people will send gifts. Accept them graciously, write your thank you notes, and then donate the gifts to charity if you can't use them.

Showering Them with Love

Q What are appropriate shower gifts for non-traditional couples?

A When some dear friends of mine announced their engagement last year, I called my mother – that font of all etiquette wisdom – to ask her this very question. "Back when I was a girl," she said, "the ladies bought kitchen gadgets and the fellows stocked the liquor cabinet." Well, my friends have a fully equipped kitchen and one of them is clean and sober. Back to the drawing board.

Small household objects – candlesticks, picture frames, and the like – make ideal shower gifts, as do goodie baskets: some bath salts, a loofah, and a scented candle, for example, or a selection of exotic teas. Save large-ticket items for the wedding itself.

A totally straight colleague and friend once spent several hours letting me cry on her shoulder (literally) about a crisis in one of my SM relationships, even though she was totally out of her depth. – Dominic

Most of my pagan friends are not queer and refuse to get how hostile it is to always invoke the divine as if they were a married het couple. – TerraFire

May We? *Mais oui.*

Q Should gay couples register at Tiffany's?

A Whether at Tiffany's or Target, couples may register wherever they please.

Taking Stock of Cards

Q I have a terrible time trying to find appropriate wedding and anniversary cards for the nontraditional couples in my life. Are there other options?

A Believe it or not, commercial greeting cards are a relatively recent invention; before their advent, people simply wrote letters, and the most traditional still do. If you are of an artistic bent yourself, you can always create cards for

your friends, which will undoubtedly be more meaningful than anything Hallmark could produce. Otherwise, take pen to paper and tell your loved ones what they mean to you. Your letter will surely be cherished for years to come.

Pagan Revelries

Q I am a queer Christian who has been invited to a friend's wedding. My friend is Wiccan, and the ceremony will be held out of doors in a local park.

People in the queer community, especially lesbian-identified women, are often shocked and angry when they find I am married. – TerraFire

I'm assuming from the invitation – which referred to a "handfasting" – that this will be a Wiccan ritual. I'm happy to attend, but I have no idea how to act. What do I wear? Will I be expected to do anything "Pagan"? I don't want to offend my friend, but I don't want to do anything that goes against my own beliefs, either.

A Just as most of the ritual actions in a Christian church are undertaken by the clergy apart from the congregation, Wiccan ritual is generally led by one or two clergy, often a priestess and/or a priest. In most cases, you will not be asked to do anything other than witness the rite and offer your best wishes for the couple. You are not required to say any prayers; just remain silent if you find the wording objectionable. If cakes and wine are offered as part of the ritual, you are not obligated to partake. Observe the same courtesies as you would in your church: don't touch any ritual items on the altar, and follow directions about when to stand or sit.

Handfastings are often more casual than other weddings – and medieval themes are common – but if no other dress code is indicated on the invitation, simple business attire will be appropriate. Since you will be in a park, take into consideration weather conditions and the ground you'll be walking on; high heels and delicate sandals aren't your best bet for an outdoor ceremony.

Dressed for Distress II: The Wedding Guest

Q I just received an invitation to a friend's commitment ceremony. No dress code was specified. What should I wear?

A Dress codes are part of the unwritten information that invitations provide. Take your cue from the style of the invitation itself, as well as the time and location of the ceremony.

<i>Invitation Style</i>	<i>Ceremony Time</i>	<i>Style of Dress</i>
Formal (engraved, printed, or handwritten invitation with traditional wording)	Evening	Men: evening formal attire (black tie) Women: evening dresses (floor-length)
	Daytime	Men: dark business suits, with conservative shirt and tie Women: street-length dresses
Semiformal or Informal (look for nontraditional wording, printing, or “novelty” style)	Daytime or Evening	Men: dark suits (dark blazer with light pants in summer) Women: cocktail dresses or simple business attire

No matter what you know about the people in question, do not assume that their ceremony will be anything other than traditional unless they explicitly tell you otherwise. Don’t wear fetish gear or sexy, revealing clothing, and keep any permanent adornments, including collars, under wraps. If you are at all unsure about the style of the wedding, ask the hosts what they will be wearing. Of course, not all altsexers have such traditional ceremonies. A friend recently attended a ceremony performed by a santera (Santeria priestess) with strong Pagan overtones, with a guest list that included gay, bi, het, transgendered, kinky, and vanilla folks. The invitation specified “Daytime formal; full leathers or dress uniform acceptable.” One member of the couple was in a formal men’s kimono, the other in a Renaissance-style velvet gown with a leather corset.

I wear my padlocked collar 24/7. I do not wear it outside my clothing, but if it falls out I do not panic trying to hide it. – Tracy Thomas

Aw. Do I Gotta?

Q I am invited to the wedding reception of a friend of mine. The event will take place outdoors during the daytime, and the invitation is very traditional looking. I haven't owned a suit, or even a sport jacket, for twenty years, and I'm damned if I'm going to buy one now. These people are very casual, despite the invitation's tone. Is it really necessary for me to put on a monkey suit?

A Yes. Even the most casual people may decide to honor as important an occasion as their own wedding with a little extra panache. Accepting an invitation implies tacit agreement to respect the host/ess's wishes regarding activities, scheduling, company, and yes, dress. If you can't or won't play by the rules as stated on your invitation, you must decline.

Dressed for Distress III: The Dreaded Butt Bow

Q I have been invited to be a bridesmaid in a friend's wedding. Friend is straight, thin, and traditionally pretty. I am none of the above. My problem is The Dress. It's pink. It's frilly. It has an enormous bow on the back. I love her and am very flattered that she asked me to be in her wedding party, but I just can't wear The Dress. What should I do?

I was sort of a bridesmaid. We held the bride in place for her ritual flagging and branding. - Heidi

A If you truly can't handle The Dress, you must decline to be in the wedding party. Assure your friend that you love her dearly and wish her well, but can't accept her kind offer. Perhaps you can do something else to help her: throw her a bridal shower, for example.

All Good Things: Handling Death

It isn't a morbid sense of humor that leads etiquetteers to give advice on funerals directly after the section on weddings. Birth, marriage, and death remain the most important events in our lives and those around us. How we handle death speaks volumes.

I'm So Sorry

Q What should one say in a condolence letter? Many of my friends have died of AIDS, and knowing how painful their deaths have been, I never know what to write. It's particularly difficult when the surviving partner is also sick.

A Like thank you notes, condolence letters may seem formulaic, but they can still convey deep care and concern. The three basic elements of the letter :

✧ acknowledge the recipient's loss

✧ recall some good quality of the deceased or a fond memory you have of him/her

✧ assure the recipient that s/he (and any others affected) are in your thoughts

Refrain from empty platitudes like "S/he's gone to a better place," or "It really must be a relief to you." These do more harm than good, especially if the recipient is facing a terminal illness.

The best kind of support I have had from people outside the leather community has been when people simply listen to me. – Jim Pitman

Should I Stay or Should I Go?

Q I have learned of the death of a former lover of mine through an obituary in the newspaper. We did not part on good terms, to say the least, and I had not spoken to her for almost a decade, although we lived in the same city. Still, I was shocked to hear she was gone. Is it appropriate for me to attend the funeral?

A Under the circumstances, your presence might distress her family and loved ones. You may, however, send a brief condolence letter to her family, as long as it does not mention your estrangement or any other unpleasantness.

Silence: Golden?

Q How long must one wait before mentioning someone who's died to that person's family or friends?

The main avenue of support that I experience from the straight community is when straight people treat my relationship with my partner as they would treat a committed straight relationship. – Matthew M. DeLoera

A There is no rule that forbids speaking about a dead person at any time, although you should gently change the subject if you notice that the conversation is upsetting anyone present. It is not helpful to force someone to “process” a death at anything other than what is the natural rate for that individual, but neither should one avoid sharing happy memories of someone who has died.

WHAT DO ALTSEXERS WANT?: IN CONCLUSION

Over and over, the hundreds of surveys that altsexers sent to me conveyed one simple message: we want to be treated like everyone else. Not as exceptions, not as special cases, not as oddities to be merely tolerated, but as the full and respected members of society that we strive to be.

On the political front, this implies a liberationist platform, and activists of all kinds are working to put comprehensive civil rights for altsexers on the public agenda. But in the private sphere, we're often uncertain about how to proceed. Using the shared wisdom of our communities, the common questions of our would-be allies, and traditional etiquette, we've explored a few ground rules.

It's one thing to just "accept" the situation, and another to actively encourage the relationship and the commitment and to make my wife as much a part of the family as my ex-husband was. It makes me feel lucky and very loved. – Ruth

- ⌘ Context Is Everything: Etiquette varies with setting; when in doubt, look for the common denominator, which is almost always mainstream manners.
- ⌘ Define Yourself, Not Others: Identity is complex; therefore, use the language an individual prefers when describing that person, and take care to let others know about your own preferences.
- ⌘ Do Not Confuse the Public with the Private: Personal privacy is sacred; maintain your own privacy and respect that of others by not disclosing personal details without prior consent.
- ⌘ Consider Others Before You Speak or Act: One's "right" to self-expression is less important than the comfort and dignity of others; when faced with offensive speech or behavior, give the offender the benefit of the doubt, but be prepared to apply the rules of censure if necessary.

✂ Play Nice or Get Out of the Sandbox: The relationship between host and guest is governed by a set of strict but often unspoken rules; when socializing, you may either observe the reciprocal rules of hospitality or you may choose not to attend an event at all.

And now the secret must come out: these rules don't just apply to altsex communities, but to everyone. What's more, the difficulties that we altsexers face in society are not limited to us at all.

To be sure, we face specific prejudices that other people don't, but the kinds of bad behavior we've seen in this book are indicative of a larger problem. From slash-and-burn talk shows to tell-all memoirs, our culture rewards rudeness emotionally, financially, and socially. Much as altsexers may try to stand apart from the mainstream, we can't help but be dragged down by the undertow of cheap shots and low blows.

What does set altsexers apart is the fact that we are at the forefront of changing attitudes. We cannot leave the job of educating others about our lives to the mainstream media, academia, or the churches, let alone the political demagogues and common bigots. We've seen the results, and they are not pretty. But in order for us even to get a fair hearing from our friends, families, and coworkers, we have to play by society's rules, while still maintaining our own values. Lady Etiquette has shown us how.

Etiquette may not save the world in a day... but it will certainly make it a more pleasant place to live while we do the work of liberation.

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